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PARENTS WHO KILL: MEDIA CONSTRUCTIONS OF MALE AND FEMALE FILICIDE  
CASES

by

Mary McCluskey

Master of Arts, Wilfrid Laurier University, 2019

THESIS

Submitted to the Department/Faculty of Criminology

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for

Master of Arts in Criminology

Wilfrid Laurier University

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## **ABSTRACT**

Often, mothers who murder their children are portrayed as “bad mothers”, as “the news media creates monsters out of [those] who transgress what is considered appropriate maternal behavior” (Goc, 2009, p. 42). This is especially important, as the media has created portrayals of females as murderers which are different from portrayals of males who murder their children. Previous research has addressed the association of motherhood in female offenders, however, there is a lack of research that compares the portrayals of females and males who murder their children, formally known as filicide. Using a social constructionist lens, this research analyzes filicide cases, and the labels and social constructions that are attributed to each gender through media representations. The goal is to reveal the gender norms that are reinforced through the following popular cases of filicide: Charisse Stinson, Julie Schenecker, David Creato Jr., and Chris Watts. From the findings, I suggest that the news media continues to reinforce traditional gendered constructions, by insinuating that males act within the framework of hegemonic masculinity, and the actions of females are medicalized.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

In general, the average person has no direct experience with crime or the criminal justice system. Not surprisingly, numerous studies show that the media plays a significant role in informing the public about crime and justice issues. As such, there is an important need to better understand media constructions of crime and official responses to crime.

Many academics, such as Barnett (2006), Goc (2009), and Weare, (2013) have specifically highlighted the negative portrayals of female offenders in the news media. In particular, some research has found that mothers who murder their children are framed by the media as “bad mothers”. This body of research argues that media construction of female offenders is informed by gender role norms. Gender role norms are defined as the social expectations associated with behaviors of men and women, and that reinforce feminine or masculine ideals (Pulerwitz & Barker, 2008; Wiest & Duffy, 2013). Women are expected to be caring, compassionate and loving, while men are socialized to be aggressive and dominant, which leads to violent behaviour. Therefore, when women commit crimes, particularly crimes against children, “the news media creates monsters out of [those] who transgress what is considered appropriate maternal behavior” (Goc, 2009, p. 42). In regard to crimes against children, such as filicide, media representations of female murderers may then differ from men who murder their children as gender role norms have typically dictated that women are caretakers. As a result, when a mother kills her child, media constructions are often more negative (Saavedra & Manuel de Oliveria, 2017).

Although previous research has addressed the characterization of motherhood in female offenders (Goc, 2009), research that compares the portrayals of men and women who murder

their children, and the labels that are attributed to each through media representations have not been thoroughly addressed. The goal of this research is to conduct a comparative analysis of female and male filicide cases to address potential gendered differences in media portrayals. My research addresses the following three research questions: (a) How does the media construct stories about male filicide as compared to cases of female filicide?; (b) What are the main discourses and representations that arise from each of the cases?; and (c) How does the media reinforce traditional constructions of gender, such as motherhood and fatherhood?

Filicide, although relatively rare, is constructed by the media as an act that is inhumane and volatile. Considered the most common cause of intentional death for children in the United States, filicide is known as the murder of a child by a parent (Wiest & Duffy, 2013; Barnett, 2006). Research has suggested that filicide is committed equally by both men and women, but the media popularized the idea of filicide as an act committed mostly by women (Dawson, 2015; West, Friedman, & Resnick, 2009), which creates assumptions and constructions regarding female violence.

This study uses (Loseke's 2003) to illustrate how the media constructs portrayals of male filicide that are different than female filicide. Social constructionism argues that individuals must take a critical stance towards our assumptions about the world (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Burr, 1995). This theory was used to analyze filicide cases and highlight the different media constructions between males and females. Furthermore, I draw on the medicalization literature (Conrad & Schneider, 1992) to demonstrate how violent females are medicalized and their behavior is constructed as an "illness", which raises the question: are males medicalized in the same way as females? Females are often constructed as "mad" or "bad", where they are either



constructed as having a mental illness, or they are “bad” mothers and “evil doers” for deviating from traditional feminine roles (Best, 2003; Weare, 2013).

Chapter two of this research examines the theoretical orientation of social constructionism in the social problems and the medicalization framework. I also examine literature about the act of filicide and provide a detailed history of filicide and constructions of deviant women, including the construction of motherhood and how it impacts media constructions of filicide.

Chapter three details the methodological approaches used to collect and analyze my data. I used an inductive, qualitative media analysis to examine four cases of filicide, which includes Charisse Stinson, Julie Schenecker, David Creato Jr, and Chris Watts. The main data source used for this study was newspapers, which were collected through the database Factiva.

Chapter four consists of the results of my study involving female filicide cases, which include narratives such as: pathologizing female offenders and the flawed mother narrative. Each narrative reflects the findings of the female filicide cases that were coded and analyzed. This chapter also discusses the analysis of the cases, drawing from academic literature and newspaper articles.

Chapter five discusses the results of the male filicide cases, which includes narratives such as: hegemonic masculinity, and the born criminal. Each of these narratives are discussed and analyzed in prospective to the two male filicide cases chosen for this research. Through the analysis of various filicide cases, I was able to better understand how males and females are constructed through a gendered lens, and how that affects public assumptions.

Chapter six focuses on the discussion of my research, including broader narratives and the main differences in how male and female cases were portrayed, including mental illness,

newsworthiness, and race. This section answers the following question: Are males medicalized in the same way as females? Throughout the research, it is found that males and females are not medicalized in the same way, as females are constructed as mentally ill, and are intertwined with motherhood. Moreover, males are associated with dominant male characteristics, such as anger and aggression.

In the final chapter of this research, I discuss the limitations and future research of my study. I also highlight the implications of this research, and how it reveals that the media constructs female violence differently than male violence. I argue that females are intertwined with femininity and motherhood, and males are associated with masculinity and aggression. The continuation of media portrayals of filicide cases feeds into public perceptions of gender, and how males and females are supposed to behave in a way that reinforces their traditional gendered roles.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Review of the Literature**

According to Bourget, Grace, and Whitehurst (2007), filicide is a relatively rare occurrence, especially in North America. The rarity of filicide stems partially due to legislation to protect children. Many countries, including the United States and Canada, have enacted legislation, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which provide “child protective agencies with powers to intervene when suspicions arise that the child is at risk” (Bourget et al., 2007, p. 80). Despite infrequent occurrences – in 2006, there were only 60 cases of family homicide committed against children under the age of 18 across Canada (Statistics Canada, 2006) – the media extensively covers cases of filicide, as a result of the newsworthiness and rarity of the event. This coverage, in turn, can lead to disproportionate associations of certain gendered behaviors and characteristics. According to previous research, filicide is committed equally by both men and women; however, the media popularizes the idea of filicide as an act committed mostly by women (Dawson, 2015). Furthermore, since filicide has generally been viewed as a traditionally female crime, women have been the target of cultural ideas of (women who deviate from traditional ideals of) femininity and motherhood. Mothers who commit an act of murder against their child are scrutinized by not only the public, but the media as well, as they deviate from the traditional ideals of what constitutes a woman (Wiest & Duffy, 2013).

### **Social Constructionism**

To understand the construction of women and men in the media, this research draws on a social constructionist framework to unpack the ways in which gender is socially constructed in cases of filicide. Berger and Luckman proposed that everyday life is meaningful and maintained intersubjectively by actions and thoughts (Segre, 2016). Through Berger’s and Luckman’s views

of social constructionism, they acknowledge that the reality of every day life is often taken for granted as reality, and that reality is simply a fact (Berger & Luckman, 1966). Berger and Luckman (1966) also believe that “everyday life is made possible by a common, shared stock of knowledge which provides instruction on the appropriate conduct in a variety of circumstances” (Segre, 2016, p. 94). With the shared knowledge among the public, Berger and Luckman believe that it is socially distributed accordingly to certain groups and individuals (Segre, 2016).

There are a few additional premises of social constructionism. First, the social world is socially constructed through human interaction and language (Best, 2008; Houston, 2001). Secondly, Burr (1995) acknowledged that “the ways in which we commonly understand the world, the categories and concepts we use, are historically and culturally specific” (p. 3). For example, the way in which an individual understands the world is dependant on where and when someone lives (Burr, 1995). Moreover, our ways of understanding are not only specific to a particular culture, but they are also products of that culture and history (Burr, 1995). Thirdly, social constructionists “argue against the notion that there are essential structures within society or the individual. Instead, they invite the observer to take account of the relativistic and subjective nature of the social world where all knowledge is perspectival and contingent” (Houston, 2001, p. 847 as cited in Lyotard, 1984). Lastly, social constructionism links our understandings and narratives about ourselves and the world to our own actions (Houston, 2001).

Berger and Luckman’s (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality* shares similar stance on meaning as symbolic interactionists. Symbolic interactionism emerges from the social psychology of George Herbert Mead, who was influenced by American pragmatism (Jeon, 2004, p. 250). Building on Mead’s ideas, Blumer (1969) coins the term symbolic interaction and developed three main premises. The first premise states that “human beings act toward things on

the basis of the meanings that the things have for them” (p. 2). Secondly, the meanings of such things arise out of the interactions that one has with others. Lastly, Blumer argued that “these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters” (p. 2). Overall, symbolic interactionists theorized that meaning is not inherent but rather is negotiated and adapted through interactions.

One of the main ideas put forward by Berger and Luckman (1966) is that society itself is viewed as existing as both an objective and subjective reality. Segre (2016) acknowledges that “as an objective reality, society presupposes habitual and meaningful actions which have become typified, and thus institutionalized” (p. 94). Furthermore, an institutional world “is experienced as both legitimate, and having an objective reality” (Segre, 2016, p. 94), which is formed from the constructions associated with individuals’ performances (Berger & Luckman, 1966). Segre (2016) states that “in order to make reality subjectively meaningful, individuals must be made members of society through primary and secondary socialization” (p. 95), and it is only through socialization in which an individual becomes a member of society (Berger & Luckman, 1966). Berger and Luckman defined primary and secondary socialization as the following:

Primary socialization is the first socialization an individual undergoes in childhood, through which he becomes a member of society. Secondary socialization is any subsequent process that inducts an already socialized individual into new sectors of the objective world of his society. (p. 150)

It is through the socialization process that individuals are “born into an objective social structure within which he encounters the significant others who are in charge of his socialization” (Berger & Luckman, 1966, p. 151). The way in which an individual is socialized, and presented within an objective social reality, formulates the social distribution of knowledge in society.

Although Berger and Luckman (1966) originated the concept of social constructionism, other researchers have added knowledge to the field. According to Burr (1995), social constructionism “insists that we take a critical stance towards our taken-for granted ways of understanding the world (including ourselves)” (p. 2). Loseke and Best (2003) also recognize that people create meanings to the objective world around us, and that any condition or event is not a social problem until people view the condition as frequent, troublesome, and needing change. Moreover, a condition becomes a social problem through the meaning we assign to it, and how we respond to the condition (Loseke & Best, 2003). Creating a social problem through meaning can also be done through the claims-making process (Loseke, 2003), which will be discussed later.

Burr argues that constructionism, as a theoretical perspective, insists that humans should be critical of the idea that the understandings and observations of the world unproblematically yield their nature to us, and that humans must challenge the view that knowledge is solely based upon objective, unbiased observation of the world (Burr, 1995). Furthermore, social constructionists caution humans to be critical and suspicious of our assumptions about the world, and that the categories which human beings know about the world do not necessarily refer to real divisions (Burr, 1995). One example of this is the categories of sex and gender. It is assumed if someone is either a man or woman, they must take on the normative prescriptions of masculinity and femininity. This can be applied to the concept of women, femininity and motherhood. Often, individual's associate being a woman with motherhood, as women possess characteristics that are constructed as feminine, such as being nurturing and caring.

## **The Importance of Language**

According to social constructionists, language plays a role in how knowledge and individuals' understandings of the world are created. According to Burr (1995):

[It] is through the daily interactions between people in the course of social life that our versions of knowledge become fabricated. Therefore, social interaction of all kinds, and particular language, is of great interest to social constructionists (p. 4).

Moreover, individuals “are born into a world where the conceptual frameworks and categories used by the people in our culture already exist” (Burr, 1995, p. 7). Language is important in this reflection, as the way a person thinks and the categories they use, are instilled through language, and language is essential in understanding the world around us (Best, 2008; Burr, 1995). Language is the basis of how humans interact and understand the world around them, therefore, it is a precondition for thought (Burr, 1995).

Burr (1995) raises an interesting point, as she insists that the world is constructed through communication, hence language can be thought of as performative. Moreover, Looren de Jong (2010) argues that all language is performative, and it constitutes realities. The language that is used by individuals create particular knowledge, meanings, and understandings of the world, which can be seen with the use of gender.

The association of labels and language with females and males will be further explored below, specifically concerning how society constructs male and female filicide cases.

## **Construction and Medicalization of Punitive People**

**Claims-making.** Social constructionism argue that social problems are constructed through the claims-making process, in which a claim is described as a verbal, visual or behaviour action that tries to persuade the public to take a social condition seriously, turning it into a social

problem (Loseke & Best, 2003). Social problems are defined as “the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions” (Spector & Kitsuse, 2001, p 75). Moreover, claims-makers--those who make the claims--insist that the condition is wrong, and something must be done about the problem/condition (Best, 2008). In other words, claims-makers try to convince others that something is wrong and needs to be addressed. Claims-makers also use the media to bring their claims to the attention of a wider audience. Best (2008) states that “stories and photographs in newspapers and magazines, as well as reports broadcast on radio and television news program, can make both the public and policy makers more aware of claims” (p. 20). For example, the media focuses on criminal behaviour, which often can be misrepresented through the claims-making process. Often, violent crime is represented through the news media as a popular act, however, it is disproportionate to the number or types of crimes that are typically reported.

Claims-makers can construct people as social problems, which can be problematic when claims-makers construct individuals or groups of individuals villains, such as murderers or sexual deviants, as dangerous outsiders, and less than human (Best, 2008; Loseke & Best, 2003; Loseke, 2003). Constructing people as villains often create feelings of blame, condemnation and punishment among the public, and can influence public perceptions (Loseke, 2003).

### **Medicalization of deviant behavior.**

The construction of certain individuals as a social problem can also be done through the process of medicalization (Best, 2003). The medicalization of deviance is a tendency--especially in the United States--to construct physical or mental illness as the cause of an individual's worrisome behavior, in which their troubling conditions are defined as medical problems (Best, 2003; Loseke, 2003). Moreover, the medicalization framework constructs the people as the



problem without assigning responsibility or blame (Best, 2003; Loseke, 2003). One example is battered women's syndrome wherein victims of abuse who kill their husband are not viewed by the public or criminal justice system as responsible. Through the syndrome, their actions are constructed as stemming from the psychological trauma of abuse (Best, 2003). The medicalization framework takes away responsibility of women, which can cause problems if agency is removed from women but not men. This framework can raise the question: Are women and men medicalized in the same way?

Best (2003) also raises concerns around the medicalization of people in contemporary society. First, by medicalizing people it shifts the responsibility from the individual to another cause, such as mental illness. Second, medicalization provides a familiar frame, often referred to as the medical model, for thinking about an issue or problem. In this sense, an individual's problem is medical and should be treated, fixed, and controlled by medical experts (Best, 2003). Medicalization also has an individualistic framework, which focuses on the individual behavior instead of larger, social problems, such as poverty (Best, 2003). The framework of medicalization will be used in this research to analyze and understand how different genders are constructed and viewed as a medicalized problem. Women and men are often medicalized differently, especially within violent criminal cases, which is problematic when medicalization frames people as needing punishment. The research questions I seek to answer within this research is as follows: (a) How does the media construct stories about male filicide as compared to cases of female filicide?; (b) What are the main discourses and representations that arise from each of the cases?; and (c) How does the media reinforce traditional constructions of gender, such as motherhood and fatherhood? The following chapter will discuss the act of filicide, and how men and women are constructed differently within the media.

## **Filicide in Western Nations**

### **History of Filicide**

In this chapter, the historical and traditional views of filicide will be discussed, followed by the laws associated with violence against children. Furthermore, definitions, categorical concepts and characteristics of filicide will be presented. Next, statistical data on filicide will be provided, as well as differences in gendered motivations for males and females.

Although filicide is looked down upon in Western countries, filicide was and still is seen as a common practice in Eastern cultures. For example, traditionally, the act of filicide and infanticide was once normalized among Japanese culture, as it was viewed “that newborn children were not fully formed humans, and as such were disposable; and that to do right by their chosen children, responsible parents might need to destroy some infants at birth” (Drixler, 2013, p. 30). European countries also practiced infanticide for various reasons, including lack of economic resources, dislike for female children, and remove illegitimate children (Rapaport, 2006, pg. 547). Saavedra and De Oliveira (2017) also acknowledged that “prior to the eighteenth century, infanticide was very common” (p. 346), and the subject of filicide has been met by numerous individuals with ambivalence (Spinelli, 2005).

It was around the eighteenth century when laws in Canada, the United States, and Europe became strict surrounding women and the treatment of children (Spinelli, 2005). Although there are laws surrounding the killing of one’s child, filicide “has been treated as a far different crime than other homicide” (Spinelli, 2005, p. 16). In the United States, there is no law governing filicide, as a woman who kills their child is charged with homicide (Spinelli, 2005). Strangle (2008) acknowledged that

maternal killings are treated as a lesser offense than general homicide in the United States and are trivialized to an even greater extent in places like England and Canada, where Infanticide Acts automatically mitigate sanctions for mothers who kill. (p. 701)

There are some scholars in the United States that are in support of Infanticide Acts and Filicide Acts, which are currently present in Canada. Introducing these acts in the United States would weaken the sentencing of these crimes in the criminal justice system (Stangle, 2008).

### **Rates and Patterns of Filicide**

According to Dawson (2011), there is no set definition of filicide. However, filicide is best described as the killing of one's child. There are two popular classifications that fall under filicide: infanticide and neonaticide. Debowska, Boduzek and Dhingra (2015) acknowledged that "the terms filicide, infanticide, and neonaticide have been used interchangeably in child homicide studies" (p. 114). According to the Criminal Code of Canada, infanticide is referred to as the following:

A female person commits infanticide when by a wilful act or omission she causes the death of her newly-born child, if at the time of the act or omission she is not fully recovered from the effects of giving birth to the child and by reason thereof or of the effect of lactation consequent on the birth of the child her mind is then disturbed. (1985, S. 233, p. 283)

Dawson (2011) also referred to infanticide as the killing of a child under the age of one, whereas neonaticide "is the murder of a newborn on his or her day of birth" (Dawson, 2011, p. 163 as cited in Porter & Gavin, 2010). As noted in the criminal code of Canada, only females can be charged with infanticide, whereas males are charged with homicide (Canadian CRC, retrieved 2019). The difference in criminal charges can play a role in the length and severity of

punishment given. The issue of punishment among male and female murderers will be discussed in a later chapter.

In terms of violent crimes, filicide is not perceived as a frequent act in America, but although it is a covert practice, it occurs nonetheless (Barnett, 2006). In Canada between 1961 and 2011, there were accounts of 1,612 children under the age of 18 murdered by their parents. Furthermore, Debowska et al (2015, p. 114) stated that “homicide rates for children aged one to four are reported to be higher than for those aged five to 15 years, suggesting that the risk of a child being killed decreases with age”. According to Spinelli (2005) the killing of an infant in the first year of life accounts for 1 in 3 of all US injury-based deaths based and “in 1992, parents committed 290 murders of their children (including adult children) [in that year]” (McKee & Shea, 1998, p. 680). In 2005, there were 295 cases of filicide committed by a parent towards their child under the age of five (Bureau of Justice, retrieved 2019).

Although filicide is not a frequent crime, characteristics of filicide offenders have been extensively studied. As research demonstrates, filicide offenders are often economically disadvantaged, young, isolated, and lacking intimate partners (Hatters-Friedman & Resnick, 2009). McKee and Shea (1998) gathered statistics on women who were charged with filicide, and results displayed that 80% of women were of low economic status, 80% were the primary caretakers, and most were unemployed.

Women who committed filicide fall into two categories. The first, those who commit neonaticide, tend to be young, unmarried, free of mental illness or disorders, who had unwanted pregnancies, or who had concealed their pregnancies due to fear of rejected by their families (Dobson & Sales, 2000; Hatters Friedman & Resnick, 2009). The second type, those who commit infanticide (infants after the day of birth), tend to be older, married, have a history of

mental disorders and illness, and have family or social stress (Dobson & Sales, 2000). Moreover, the concealment and denial of pregnancies is a trend among filicide cases, as Putkonen, Weizmann-Henelius, Collander, Santtila, and Eronen (2007) found that 91% of the cases in their study had concealed their pregnancy. The concealment of pregnancies can be explained in part of abandonment or rejection by family. Other researchers have noted that concealment is associated with the offender's "concern about her parents' reaction to the pregnancy" (Beyer, Mack, & Shelton, 2008, p. 530). The majority of women who conceal their pregnancies also experience stress from hiding their pregnancy (Beyer et al., 2008).

According to Dobson and Sales (2000), mental illness is more common among women who commit infanticide rather than neonaticide. This is in part due to the onset of postpartum depression, which typically emerge approximately three days after giving birth. However, neonaticide offenders typically exhibit little to no symptoms of mental illness (Dobson & Sales, 2000). Other researchers have also studied this phenomenon, citing that women are more likely to experience mental illness after giving birth than at any other time in their life (Spinelli, 2001), and mental illness is more apparent in infanticide offenders than neonaticide offenders (Friedman & Resnick, 2009). Neonaticide offenders who do suffer from mental illness are recognized to be older, married, have other children, and were more likely to have had prenatal care (Friedman & Resnick, 2009). Putkonen, et al., (2007) also examined cases of neonaticide and discovered that only four out of 32 cases were diagnosed with a mental illness. These women belonged to an older age group, and "they were married, had children, attended prenatal care, did not conceal their pregnancy or the actual neonaticide (...) and were not criminally responsible" (p. 19). This finding suggests that mental illness rarely affects neonaticide offenders, and when it does, it is usually with older, married women.

Filicide also differs in terms of gendered motivation, as research suggests that men and women commit filicide for different reasons. However, the number of filicide cases are similar for male and females; 31% of children are murdered by their fathers, and 30% are murdered by their mothers (Barnett, 2006). Dawson (2015) argued “that mothers have more opportunities to kill younger children because they spend more time with them at that age than fathers – in short, their time at risk is higher” (p. 164). It is important to note that when discussing constructions of women and men in the media, fathers who kill their children are referred to as committing paternal filicide, and mothers are classified as committing maternal filicide (McKee & Egan, 2013).

According to Bourget, Grace, and Whitehurst (2007), women who commit filicide tend to be married and to report higher levels of stress. Higher stress levels are partly due to acting as the primary caretaker, unemployment/financial issues, abusive relationships, conflict with family, and lack of access to support. Social isolation, and history of child abuse are also factors associated with maternal filicide. Furthermore, another reasoning for filicide, which specifically applies to women, is postpartum depression. Jefferies, Horsfall and Schmied (2017) acknowledged that “many women find the increasing stress of caring for a newborn makes them vulnerable to the development of serious mental illness such as postnatal psychosis” (p. 24). The stress accompanied by the responsibility of caring for and nurturing a child can be overwhelming for some, especially mothers, which may result in many cases of filicide due to postpartum strain (Jefferies et al. 2017).

Postpartum depression has played a role in many filicide cases, including Andrea Yates and Rosa Richards (Easteal, Bartels, Nelson & Holland, 2015). Postpartum depression often is used to describe a mother as crazy, which appears quite frequently in cases of maternal filicide.

Wiest and Duffy (2013) acknowledge that it is difficult to accept that a mother in her ‘right mind’ could be capable of such an act” (Wiest & Duffy, 2013, p. 348).

Although maternal filicide has been greatly researched, paternal filicide has limited information regarding the motivations behind committing an act of filicide. However, some researchers have noted drastic differences between male and female filicide. Bourget et al., (2007) acknowledge that men who commit filicide often have a history of violent behavior and have committed previous family violence. They are also likely to have had “a personal history of abuse in childhood” (p. 78). Similar to mothers, fathers also experience life stressors, such as financial difficulties, impending marital breakup, and fear of separation. Bourget et al., (2007) note that motivational factors differ for men, and include attempting to control the child’s behavior, or misinterpreting the child’s behavior. Fathers involved in filicide have also experienced the sense of personal inadequacy and felt as though they lacked parental skills. Wilczynski (1997) highlights other reasons for murdering one’s child:

Men tend to kill for reasons associated with retaliation (usually against their partner), jealousy of or rejection by the child, or discipline. On the other hand, filicidal women often kill unwanted children (most frequently newborn babies—neonaticide—or sometimes older children) (p. 427).

Despite statistically committing a similar number of acts of filicide, there are distinct differences in the motivations and characteristics between women and men. Men tend to use more violent methods and have had previous encounters with their violent behavior, whereas women often suffer from postpartum depression and have unwanted tendencies towards their children (Bourget et al., 2007). Overall, these differences in motivation and reasoning for filicide can play a role in the way it is framed and constructed in the news media.

## **Media Constructions of Filicide**

### **Media Constructions of Criminal and Deviant Women**

Negative constructions of women who deviate from traditional gender norms is not a new phenomenon. Most crime statistics clearly indicate that women commit significantly less violent crime – across Canada in 2015, women accounted for 55,550 cases of violent crimes, while men accounted for 191,367 cases (Statistics Canada, 2015). Nevertheless, violent women are often socially constructed as “mad” or “bad” in the media (Weare, 2013). Researchers have posited that the deviation from gender norms is perceived as posing a threat to the fundamental social structures, resulting in these negative labels that subsequently shape our beliefs and assumptions (Noh, Lee & Feltey, 2010; Weare, 2013), which can ultimately influence the stigmatization of men and women offenders.

Despite its lower frequency, female criminality often results in greater news coverage when it is violent or directed towards children (Jones & Wardle, 2008). According to Noh et al., (2010), “a woman who kills provides extant sensationalism” (p. 111). Berrington and Honkatukia (2002) describe that women tend to commit few acts of violence, but when they do, their actions are highly publicized. Their actions are viewed as newsworthy, which is enhanced by the rarity of female violence, and the challenge that the act poses to traditional perceptions and stereotypes of women. Furthermore, Jones and Wardle (2008) acknowledged that “the portrayal of female criminals through the ages has become entrenched with women constructed as ‘mad’ rather than inherently ‘bad’, using mental illness as the only way to explain a woman challenging her ‘naturally’ passive and compliant characteristics” (p. 57). Gilbert (2002) also stated that today, especially within the United States, women who kill their children are continuously categorized as mad and bad, or as harmless victims.



The constructions of female offenders as “bad”, “mad” or “victim”, specifically in newspaper portrayals, often appear through the identity of a “battered woman”: those who have been abused by a partner (Weare, 2013). Noh et al., (2010) analyzed newspaper portrayals of battered women who have committed murder, and they discovered that “through images of helplessness, claims makers in the media have promoted a collective understanding of the battered woman as a person whose identity is predominantly that of a victim” (Noh et al., 2010, p.113). Furthermore, “in cases of the battered woman who kills, media reports may have featured the claims of prosecutors, which contest efforts to mitigate personal responsibility” (Noh et al., 2010, p. 113). However, women were also seen as mad or bad, as they killed their partners due to suffering from a psychological pathology. Noh et al., (2010) found that 38.7 percent of all articles in their sample portrayed the image of a battered women who is irrational or insane, and their behaviour is a product of battered women syndrome (BWS), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or another psychological illness. Essentially, being portrayed as a battered woman can become the label of a victim, as well as “mad” or “bad”. Moreover, the battered women who kill for vengeance are portrayed as “rational manipulative cold-blooded killers” (p. 120). Overall, Noh et al. (2010) established that “the predominant social construction of battered women who kill was one of female deviants; they were either mad or bad” (p. 126), which reinforces traditional views of violent women as either cold-blooded killers (bad) or irrational (mad) (Noh et al., 2010).

Jones and Wardle (2008) examined media constructions of female criminality through a case study of Maxine Carr. Specifically, Carr was involved in the murder of two girls alongside her boyfriend, Ian Huntley. Though Carr was not complicit in the crimes, she did initially obstruct justice by providing Huntley with an alibi. As part of the study, Jones and Wardle

examined headlines and accompanying photographs in 371 newspaper articles. Although Huntley was convicted of murder and Carr was not, she was constructed as being actively involved in the murder. For example, images of Carr in news articles were repeated, large, in colour, and ultimately depicted Carr as ultimate image of the female criminal. The portrayal of Carr as a female murderer misrepresents her role in the crime, and reinforces certain gender constructions of female offenders, such as violating “nurturing, non-violent ‘norms’ associated with her gender” (Jones & Wardle, 2008). Overall, images of women in the media have been predominantly revolved around an image of a ‘mad’ or ‘bad’ woman, or as a victim. Violent women provide sensationalism and newsworthiness in the media, which can portray women as challenging dominant stereotypes, such as femininity.

### **Constructions of Mothers who Kill**

In the following section, I will briefly examine common social constructions of motherhood in order to help inform the proposed study’s analyses of filicide cases. The constructions of female violence and the deviation of gender expectations has increased within mass media over the past 30 years, as violent crime committed by women increased during the 1990s, leading to sensationalized media reports (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002). Many media constructions of female criminality and violence have circulated since Greek mythology. Filicide, specifically female filicide, was popularized with the Medea Myth. In Greek mythology, “Medea” is part of the story of Jason and the Argonauts. Medea was the daughter of King Aeetes of Colchis and wife of Jason, and in 430BC. Greek tragedian Euripides constructed Medea into the archetypal “bad” mother when Euripides placed a dagger in her hand and influenced her to kill her children out of jealousy and rage (Goc, 2008; 2009). Medea killed her two sons when she was abandoned by her husband, Jason. Barnett (2013) explains “in the Greek tragedy Medea,

the protagonist, desperate and angry after her husband abandons her, announces, “I am undone,” then murders her two young children, showing no remorse” (p. 505). The Medea Myth has since been used to symbolize murderous mothers in society and is used by researchers as a frame for understanding the construction of murderous mothers in the news media. Goc (2009) explained the “Medea news frame” as a “frame which allows for the creation of blaming news discourses that are not only prejudicial towards these particular mothers, but also assist in the construction of prejudiced representations concerning maternity in general” (p.34). Furthermore, “the way journalists represent mothers who step outside what society regards as normal maternal behaviour, or who are charged with harming their children, can be called a Medea frame” (Goc, 2008, p. 215). For my research, the Medea news frame is expected to emerge in relation to the construction of violent mothers in news media, and how they are portrayed as “evil”.

Traditionally, social constructions of women have been informed by gender expectations of motherhood and femininity. For instance, women are viewed as possessing qualities of being caring, nurturing and loving (Barnett, 2005). Stangle (2008) acknowledged that in patriarchal societies, femininity is often linked with the ideals of a traditional mother. The link between femininity and motherhood is an important frame that is often utilized in cases of female filicide. Wiest and Duffy (2013) reiterated that “mothers who commit violence are seen as either the antithesis of a typical woman (i.e. evil), or their violent behaviors are explained away by the notion that they are ‘out of their minds’ (i.e. insane)” (p. 348). The deviation from the role of a caring and traditional mother automatically classifies females as “bad mothers” and “evil doers”, which positions violent women as the “other”, and the not feminine (Barnett, 2005).

There are various characteristics that classify women as “mothers” and “feminine”, and as Barnett (2005) pointed out, “across time and cultures, motherhood has been idealized as a

supreme calling, a happy achievement, and a heavenly blessing” (Barnett, 2005, p. 11). Wiest and Duffy (2013) acknowledged that “prototypical feminine characteristics such as compassion, love, and nurturance are directly linked to the social construct of a ‘good mother’” (p. 348).

There is an assumption that biological women have nurturing instincts, and that “mothers are supposed to be guided by ‘natural’ feminine instincts that confer an angelic temperament and make them instantly loving toward their infants, clairvoyant about their children’s needs, and willing to place their own desires second to those of their families” (Barnett, 2006, p. 411-412).

Motherhood is often viewed as being a natural role of a woman, therefore, deviating from such a role is looked down upon. Naylor (2001) recognized that “the mother who is violent towards her child challenges understandings of what it is to be a mother, and what it is ‘to mother’” (p. 174).

Furthermore, the idea “that only the sickest woman would harm her children presents a comforting myth that permits the illusion of the good mother to continue and reinforces the cultural stereotype of women as all-loving” (Barnett, 2005, p. 19). In sum, “whenever a mother kills her child or children, she challenges the most dominant discourse on motherhood: care.

Hence, the ideal image of motherhood is transgressed and questioned” (Saavadra & De Oliveira, 2017, p. 346). This image of motherhood stigmatizes violent women, specifically in the way that violent women are framed in the news media, as violent women are constructed as undeserving of motherhood.

The constructions that are associated with motherhood and femininity may in part explain the social reaction to violence committed by women. Wiest and Duffy (2013) acknowledged that given these gendered expectations of parenthood, community shock following a report of a mother killing her child or children is not terribly surprising – these mothers violate the

strongly held notions of femininity in American culture and represent the ultimate violation of our conception of the ‘good mother’ and ‘good woman’. (p. 349)

Women are governed by assumptions, myths and stereotypes which state that women are not capable of committing violent acts, and if they do, they must be “mad” and unnatural (Gilbert, 2002). Gilbert (2002) further reiterated the stereotypes of women and the reinforcement of feminine behavior:

maintaining this dichotomy between the “good” and the “bad” mother and woman continues in the legal system – especially in the United States – and in the mindset of much of society, as it acts as a method for controlling and reinforcing the behavior considered appropriate for all women. (p. 39)

The reinforcement of stereotypes of femininity and motherhood are further reaffirmed through the media and the framing of certain cases.

### **Media Discourse on Motherhood and Filicide**

The news media is one platform that differentiates behaviors of women and men in a way that reinforces certain stereotypes that are already shared by the public. The media uses frames to portray crime in a certain way, which can be problematic in cases of filicide and its link to the constructions of women and motherhood. Altheide (1997) illustrates that “the mass media and public perceptions of issues and problems are inexorably linked” (p. 648). Kenix (2011) acknowledged that the “mass media construct powerful images of reality for the public, who then contextualise these narratives against their own pre-existing schemas” (p. 44). The public gathers thoughts and ideas around certain events from how the events are portrayed and framed in the media, as Collins (2016) stated that “the images and discourse used throughout media outlets provides a framework with which its consumers may construct representations of

the world in which they live” (p. 297). Berrington and Honkatukia (2002) also emphasized the media’s influence over public perceptions and how media representations are not always accurate: “media representations create an impression of events rather than an accurate, objective, factual record of what took place” (p. 50). The media’s influence over public perceptions is problematic, as they can create false labels for certain individuals.

As Collins (2011) pointed out, violent women have typically been the target audience of the mass media, however, over the past two decades, it has become pervasive. Often “female offenders can be stigmatized twice – as a criminal and as breaking societal conventions of female submission” (p. 297). Berrington and Honkatukia (2002) expressed that committing a violent act creates a double deviation, as “in addition to breaking the law, it transgresses normative gender expectations. Hence, such an act has a special kind of news value and potential to shock the audience” (p. 66). Stigmatizing women twice can be seen in cases of filicide, as the media leaves the public with misconceptions and ideas around their deviantized behaviors, specifically in relation motherhood. Goc (2009) highlighted the media’s stigmatization towards women:

When creating news stories about children who go missing or are murdered on the streets, journalists create stories that reflect society’s fear of the evil unknown male; but when children go missing from their own homes, or are murdered in them, it is the mother, the wicked witch of fairytales, the Medea of myth, who is quickly appropriated for the news frame. (p. 43)

Coward (1997) recognized that the “maltreatment of a child by its own mother is always newsworthy and is presented as the ultimate incomprehensible act” (p. 112). Women who murder their own children as seen as “extra” deviant and the media often construct female criminality around representations of gender (Eastal et al., 2015). As Stangle (2008) clearly demonstrated,

“the discussion of violent women often focuses heavily on what it means to be female, and the criminal act in question fades into the background” (p. 707). In cases of filicide specifically, the violent act of the offender is not the main subject of news articles, but rather the focus is how the offender deviated from traditional gendered characteristics.

### **Intersectionality and Media Representations of Violent Crime**

More than gender differences, race plays an important role in the construction of crime. Intersectionality is most recognized as the notion that “subjectivity is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality” (Nash, 2008, p. 2). Moreover, an intersectional framework acknowledges that distinct systems of oppression, such as racism and patriarchy rely on one another to function and are co-dependant (Dhamoon, 2015).

Intersectionality plays a vital role in the analysis of filicide cases within the media, as cases of different ethnicity and race can potentially be constructed differently. Although this analysis is primarily focused on gender, the aspect of race is important to consider. Kimberlé Crenshaw originally used intersectionality to explain the discrimination and oppression experienced by black women in America (Wrench & Garrett, 2018). This approach addresses the marginalization within society and the criminal justice system, Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays & Tomlinson, 2013; Nash, 2008). Intersectionality is most recognized as the notion that “subjectivity is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality” (Nash, 2008, p. 2). Moreover, intersectionality is still used to critique oppression revolving around race, gender, class and sexuality, especially within the media (Collins, 2014). Collins (2014) notes that the media relies on stereotypes to classify different visible minorities as ‘good’ and ‘bad’, and overrepresents visible minorities as threats to social order, which includes criminal behavior.

Black individuals in particular are overrepresented in the criminal justice system, which is also highlighted within the media. There is a stereotype among the public and policy makers that Black individuals are criminal and violent (Thompson, 2010). Scholars have argued that the media has a role in reinforcing racial stereotypes by not correcting negative racial images and patterns, especially regarding cases of violent crime (Collins, 2014). Representations of black violence, whether true or not, are often written into a larger narrative that portrays non-Caucasian communities and groups as pathologically violent (Crenshaw, 1991). As Crenshaw (1991) acknowledges, it is not the problem that non-Caucasian individuals are being portrayed as violent, but rather, it is the lack of recognition of other narratives in non-Caucasian's experiences. The reinforcement of racial stereotypes in the media, especially regarding violent crime, often plays a role in the construction of non-Caucasian individuals. Constructing non-Caucasian violent individuals differently may have an affect on the stigmatization within society and the criminal justice system, and the treatment of black offenders.

### **Media Constructions of Filicide Cases**

Filicide cases are very rare, even in terms of news media coverage. However, when they do occur, the media “convey certain discourses on negligent and homicidal mothers susceptible to rendering certain assumptions and negative constructions of mothering more evident” (Saavedra & De Oliveira, 2017, p. 345). The media is known to “masculinize and demonize a few women, effectively casting them out of the ‘protected’ sphere of femininity, while celebrating the presumed passivity of the rest of womanhood” (Chesney-Lind & Eliason, 2006, p. 43). This can be seen in a few filicide cases, like the case of Andrea Yates.

Multiple researchers have studied the Yates case very closely, especially regarding how it was portrayed in the media at the time of the crime. Spinelli (2005) details the Yates case as a



crime that had occurred in 2001, when Andrea Yates drowned her five children in the bathtub of her home in Texas, United States. This had been one of the biggest cases of filicide that was highlighted within the media and became a global phenomenon (Spinelli, 2005). Yates had previously suffered from instability, had a family history of bipolar disorder, and was diagnosed with postpartum depression (Spinelli, 2005). The media portrayed this case as a woman who had gone “mad”. Eastal et al., (2015) acknowledged that “there was a transition from ‘bad’ to ‘mad’ when it became known that she suffered from postpartum psychosis” (p. 35). These labels influence how Yates has been perceived by the courts and the public.

Often, when women are portrayed as mentally ill, they are constructed into a “mad” mother. This may seem as a “better” construction than a “bad” mother, however, “this reinforces a traditional image of women as lacking any agency, whose behaviors are conditioned by biological and emotional disturbances that thereby prevent them from taking up their place in society” (Saavadra & De Oliveira, 2017, p. 351). Stangle (2008) recognized that “stereotypes preserve traditional definitions of femininity by either stripping all agency from “mad” women who commit violent acts or removing “bad” women from the female realm” (p.707). The media often portrays the “good girl/bad girl dichotomy, [which] works to mold violent women ‘back into what a woman should be’” (p. 707). Even though Yates suffered from a mental illness, the media framed her as an incompetent and “mad” mother and reinforced the constructions of a traditional women that is so desired. In this sense, the media often portrays women in two ways: mad or bad. As Stangle (2008) stated, “a woman therefore behaves violently only as the result of external forces beyond her control (“madness”) or because she is simply not a true woman (“badness”)” (p. 707). These two labels are the frames in which violent women, such as Yates, are presented within the media.

## **Media Constructions of Male Filicide**

While mothers continue to be at the forefront of stereotypes and myths, researchers such as Wiest and Duffy (2013) acknowledge that men do not face the same problems. They state that “traditional American masculinity is linked to such characteristics as strength (physical and emotional), power, aggression, independence, and occupational status” (Wiest & Duffy, 2013, p. 349), and therefore when men commit acts of violence, their act is not questioned. Men acting out of aggression and violence is normalized, and the public does not necessarily scrutinize them in the same way that women are scrutinized. Berrington and Honkatukia (2002) stated that “definitions and images of violence relate typically to male violence in terms of physicality, toughness and aggression. Women’s violence is more problematic and is seen as unfeminine, ‘unnatural’” (p. 59).

Most research tends to focus solely on the constructions of females, and not that of males; the differences between the two sexes and how they are both discursively constructed in the media seems to be lacking. Dawson (2015) acknowledges that “the lack of research on fathers who kill their children continues to persist” (p. 164). Barnett (2006) found that “women who killed their children were most often portrayed as evil, deceptive, and callous” (p. 416), and men are often associated with aggression and violence (Wiest & Duffy, 2013), however, the extent to which they are constructed in filicide cases is not entirely clear. In my research, I address this gap in the literature by analyzing cases of male and female filicide, and revealing the main constructions associated with the way the genders are represented.

Though filicide has always existed, albeit infrequently, the media casts the act as a much greater social problem. The media has been known to construct and shape the way that the public views certain events and representations of the world (Collins, 2016). Based on previous

research, filicide is a crime that has been promoted throughout the media, specifically regarding gendered associations. Although women and men commit the same amount of filicide, women are crucified and constructed in a different lens than men (Dawson, 2015).

As the media continues to frame violent women in a negative and destructive frame, there is a lack of research that analyzes the way males are represented in cases of filicide (Dawson, 2015). Recognizing the differences between how men and women are framed in cases of filicide could potentially reveal the ways in which the media continues to construct gendered and criminal behavior. This study examines the following research questions: (a) How does the media construct stories about male filicide compared to female filicide?; (b) What are the main discourses and representations that arise from each of the cases?; c) How does the media reinforce traditional constructions of gender (i.e., motherhood and fatherhood)? These research questions are addressed throughout the following research and provide insight into how the media continues to frame gendered constructions, and the roles in which motherhood and fatherhood are reinforced in society.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Methodology**

This research project used a qualitative media analysis (QMA) to examine cases of filicide in the news media (Altheide & Schneider, 2013). According to van den Hoonaard (2015), qualitative research uses a variety of approaches, which researchers use to help understand social processes of everyday life (van den Hoonaard, 2015), which is useful in conducting an extensive analysis of discourse, and images. Qualitative research is also often used to gain an understanding of participants and how they define their experiences (van den Hoonaard, 2015). A media/document analysis is a form of qualitative research, which I used to gain a better understanding of discourses, themes and frames that arise through news media and documents, specifically those associated with filicide (Altheide & Schneider, 2013; van den Hoonaard, 2015). Analyzing documents is an important process within media analysis, as it is “an integrated and conceptually informed method, procedure, and technique for locating, identifying, retrieving, and analyzing documents for their relevance, significance, and meaning” (Altheide & Schneider, 2013, p. 17). Researchers use document analysis to understand culture, social meanings, and institutional relations (Altheide & Schneider, 2013), which I used to uncover emerging themes in news articles related to filicide.

#### **Data Source/Collection**

Newspaper articles are the main data source that were used in this study. Data was collected using Factiva, a database that produces various news media sites, such as *CNN*, *Global News*, *The Washington Post* and *The Associated Press*. I used the names of the cases I choose as a search term in Factiva to ensure that I was collecting relevant articles. For each case, the articles were organized in a PDF file stored in a folder. From there, various news media sites that

were populated, including national and regional sites, were chosen as the sample. The sample included the news sites that produced the greatest number of articles under each case, leading to each case having one national and one regional news site selected. Choosing one regional and one national news site would demonstrate if the cases are discussed differently at a national or local level. However, after analyzing the news articles, no difference was found; further examination would be necessary. The news media sites that are included in the sample include *CNN*, *The Canadian Press*, *Mirror.co.uk.*, *The Associated Press* (National), *The Denver Channel*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Tampa Bay Times*, and *ABC Action News* (Local).

American cases are only used for this study to ensure that each of the cases are based on the same laws and societal perceptions of filicide. The United States also has a greater number of filicide cases covered in the media, and therefore access to data was easier. The number of cases used in the sample consisted of two female cases and two male cases of filicide. Specifically, the following cases were analyzed: Julie Schenecker, Charisse Stinson, David Creato Jr, and Chris Watts. These cases were chosen based two criteria: media coverage and recency (they have taken place in the last 10 years). After searching various cases, these four were the ones that produced the most data in Factiva. I decided to select more recent cases, to ensure that the constructions and portrayals within the articles are current and chose cases that were significantly covered by the media. The number of news articles analyzed per case is 25, which is 100 news articles in total. I believe that the data collected supported my research questions and therefore, I did not feel the need to collect more data.

Purposeful sampling was used in this study, as I chose and analyzed the first 25 cases that had appeared. News articles that discussed the cases were chosen and analyzed, as well as the examination of communication formats. Communication formats refer to the selection,

organization and presentation of information and text throughout the document (Altheide & Schneider, 2013, p. 61). The way in which images and font are formatted within the news articles are important in the delivery and portrayal of certain messages, which enables me to recognize certain frames and discourses.

Based on the sample collected on Factiva, the following number of articles were identified for each case: Chris Watts ( $n = 2,747$ ), David Creato Jr ( $n = 74$ ), Julie Schenecker ( $n = 302$ ), and Charisse Stinson ( $n = 113$ ). It is important to note that the number of articles populated can change daily, as new news reports are published. Based on this sampling frame, one national and one local newspaper were chosen for analysis. Specifically, the first 10-15 articles per case that were published from the selected newspaper sites were analyzed to ensure that only 25 articles from each case are selected. Two local newspaper sites (*The Denver Channel* for Chris Watts, and *ABC Action News* for Charisse Stinson) were not collected from Factiva, due to limited articles within these sites populated on Factiva. Therefore, some articles within the Chris Watts and Charisse Stinson cases were collected from the primary news site itself. Within Factiva, I selected the option “oldest first” to ensure that the articles populated are the ones that were published at the beginning of each case to ensure the data analyzed were the initial reactions from the media. Out of the sample that was collected, some of the articles were irrelevant to the case, or had mentioned the case briefly regarding another news story. These articles were removed from my sample to ensure that I was solely analyzing articles that discussed the case.

### **Description of Cases**

For the purposes of the present study, two male filicide cases and two female filicide cases were purposively sampled for analysis. The two female filicide cases included in the study

were those of Julie Schenecker and Charisse Stinson. The two male cases included are David Creato Jr., and Chris Watts. Followed is a table with descriptors from the cases:

	Sex of Offender	Number of Victims	Charges Laid	Number of Articles Used	Race
Julie Schenecker	Female	2	Two counts first-degree murder	25	White
Charisse Stinson	Female	1	First-degree murder	25	Black
David Creato Jr.	Male	1	First-degree murder	25	White
Chris Watts	Male	3	Three counts first-degree murder; one count unlawful termination of pregnancy	25	White

First, Julie Schenecker murdered her two children for “talking back”. She shot her teenage son, Powers Beau Schenecker, 13, after driving him home from soccer practice. Schenecker then shot her daughter, Calyx Schenecker, 16, in her bedroom while Calyx was doing her homework. It was reported that Schenecker was suffering from depression and was planning to commit suicide after the murders (*Tampa Bay Times*).

In the second female filicide case, Charisse Stinson, a black female, was convicted of murdering her 2-year-old son. Briefly, Stinson struck her child, causing his head to hit a wall and triggered seizures. She drove his body into the woods and left it. Initially, however, Stinson told

police that a man named “Antwan” gave the two a ride and became violent, causing Stinson to lose consciousness. When Stinson woke, her son was gone, and blamed “Antwan” for the kidnapping (*ABC Action News*).

For my examination of male filicide offenders, Chris Watts was the first case analyzed. Briefly, Watts killed his wife and two daughters and concealed their bodies at an oil field where he worked. The two daughters were concealed in oil tanks, while the wife, Shanann, was found in a shallow grave at the same site. Watts reported his family missing to police, but later confessed that he killed his wife, Shannon, after seeing her strangling their two daughters on a baby monitor. However, police revealed that it was Watts who strangled and killed his two daughters and wife (*The Denver Channel*).

In the second case, David Creato Jr. murdered his three-year-old son and left him in a wooded New Jersey park. At first, Creato Jr insisted that his son wandered out of their apartment, and reported him missing, but months later, the father was charged with murder. Investigators on the case could not identify a suspect, partially due to the victim’s autopsy that came back inconclusive multiple times. After David Creato Jr. was deemed a suspect, he confessed to the murder, and reports suggested that he murdered his son because he was becoming an impediment to the father’s relationship with his teenage girlfriend (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*).

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

A grounded theory approach was used in this research to code and analyze themes. According to Charmaz (2006), grounded theory involves separating, sorting, and synthesizing data through coding. Coding involves labelling and discovering themes within your notes and data (Charmaz, 2006; van den Hoonaard, 2015). There are usually two main phases of grounded



theory: 1) an initial phase, using line by line, or word by word coding, and 2) a more focused phase, involving the selection of significant codes to organize larger amounts of data (Charmaz, 2006). A grounded theory approach allows for various media sources to be analyzed in their own way, as opposed to using a deductive approach which may limit the analysis of the texts.

This research was conducted inductively, which begins with data gathering, coding and categorizing, and develops into theories and generalizations (Vogt, Gardner, Haeffele & Vogt, 2014). Inductive research is most common within qualitative research, as researchers collect, analyze and interpret data. Throughout this research, news paper articles were collected, coded, and analyzed, which allowed for various themes and theories to emerge.

### **Coding Procedures**

Initial coding, bucket/thematic coding, and focused coding were used to code the articles that were selected. Initial coding, which is the first step, is closely associated with grounded theory, and involves labelling themes that are found within the data (van den Hoonaard, 2012). In each PDF document, which consisted of news articles from the same news source, I highlighted sentences and words that mentioned characteristics related to motherhood or fatherhood, such as mental illness, as well as instances where the term “mother” or “father” was used. These words were important when examining the differences in gender portrayals in the media. Line-by-line coding method was used, which grounded theorists insist is important in the overall analysis (Altheide & Schneider, 2012). I also wrote notes and potential themes beside the sentences that were had mentioned gender characteristics, such as caring, loving, aggression and violence. This method helped me organize the important themes that arose from each news article/source. After I coded every PDF once, I went through each one a second time to ensure there were no major themes or codes missing. The initial themes that were identified were as

follows: mental health, describing mother, describing father, state involvement, description of case, blame on girlfriend, innocence, unexpectedness, description of relationship, reaction to event, shock, credibility of mother, false claims, changes in child services, history of family. These themes were among those listed in the PDF.

Next, I proceeded with bucket/thematic coding, which uses “theoretical sampling as a strategy to narrow your focus on emerging categories and as a technique to develop and refine them” (Charmaz, p. 107). During this coding process, I wrote out the various initial themes that were observed into a word document. I separated the word document by case, and kept the associated themes observed under each case. Moreover, I took several examples and quotes from the news articles and copied them under each relevant theme, along with the page number to ensure organization. Four major themes were used as the “bucket codes”, in which the initial codes that were identified fell under. For the female cases, two bucket codes were used: 1) pathologized/medicalized, and 2) construction of a flawed mother. The pathologized/medicalized theme had to do with the association of women and a mental illness. The codes that mentioned the women as mentally ill or had reference to their lack of agency were placed under this bucket code. The theme of constructing women as a flawed mother had to do with the women’s role as a mother or female. Any code that had an association with motherhood or gender was placed under this bucket code. The two bucket codes for the male cases of filicide were as followed: 1) hegemonic masculinity, and 2) born criminal. The theme of hegemonic masculinity refers to any association of male dominance or control within society. Any codes that mentioned or referred to male power within society were placed under this theme. The theme of the born criminal refers to violence and aggression that violent offenders, specifically men, may possess. Any codes that mentioned male traits, such as violence or aggression, were included under this theme.

Lastly, I conducted focused coding, which is usually the second major phase in coding, and involves going through material that relates to each initial, open code, and recoding them for more specific and significant themes (Charmaz, 2006; Van den Hoonaard, 2012). In this step, I organized and re-coded my preliminary themes into more significant themes, by eliminating the themes that were not found throughout most of the articles and keeping the themes that were more significant to the data. Under the pathologizing theme, multiple new themes were recoded and are as follows: a) the medicalization of female violence, b) the chivalry hypothesis, and c) removal of agency/shifting of blame. Under the flawed mother narrative theme, the new recoded themes included: a) intertwining of mother and female, b) mad versus bad, and c) the role of intersectionality. Within the male cases, the new themes that fell under hegemonic masculinity included: a) male blame, b) proclaiming innocence, and c) independence of male and father. The born criminal theme was a stand-alone theme and did not incorporate any new themes. Under each new theme that I incorporated, I wrote notes regarding the description of the theme, and how it could be interpreted for the analysis.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Results/Analysis**

Using a social constructionist lens, I conducted a qualitative media analysis of newspaper articles to examine the extent to which the media constructs male and female filicide cases. In this chapter, I examine cases of filicide to try to explain the gendered differences between male and female cases, and answer the following research questions: (a) How does the media construct stories about male filicide compared to cases of female filicide?; (b) What are the main discourses and representations that arise from each of the cases?; and (c) How does the media reinforce traditional constructions of gender (i.e., motherhood and fatherhood)? First, I describe the patterns that have emerged within the female cases. Second, I describe the patterns that have emerged within the male cases.

Overall, several important findings emerged in both male and female filicide cases. Within the female cases of filicide, two dominant narratives emerged: 1) pathologizing of female offenders through a medicalization framework, and 2) the flawed mother narrative. On the other hand, the two dominant narratives emerged in the male cases of filicide: 1) hegemonic masculinity and 2) the born criminal. As observed, the portrayals of the female and male cases are significantly different, as the females are constructed as “mad” and “bad”, whereas the males’ behaviours are constructed around notions of masculinity and aggression.

#### **Construction of Female Filicide Cases in the News Media**

While criminological research traditionally ignored women’s criminal activity, female violence has long been considered ‘newsworthy’ by the media (Barnett, 2006). Based on analyses of the selected case studies in the present study, news media frame filicide committed by mothers quite differently from those cases in which the offender was a father. Two dominant

narratives emerged in my overall analysis of female filicide cases. Through my analysis, I discovered that female offenders were 1) pathologized, and 2) constructed as a flawed mother. These two narratives will be discussed in the following section. One of the cases, Charisse Stinson, is Black, and therefore, intersectionality will also be discussed at the end of the section in order to highlight the differences in which non-white individuals are constructed in the news media.

### **Pathologizing female offenders**

**The medicalization of female violence.** The pathologizing of female offenders is not a new phenomenon, as the medicalization of women and violence have previously dictated the treatment and construction of females within the criminal justice system. The medicalization of certain deviant behaviors, such as female violence, is more prevalent in modern societies (Conrad & Schneider, 1992), which makes it important to understand the act of medicalization. Wilczynski (1997) notes that there is feminist concern over the 'medicalization' of female violence, specifically filicide, as there has been enormous focus on its political implications, such as charges laid and punishment, and constructions of the perception of treatment of women in general.

By definition, the medicalization of deviance is the construction of physical or mental illness as the cause of an individual's worrisome behavior, in which their troubling conditions are defined as medical problems (Best, 2003; Loseke, 2003). A known example of a behaviour that has been medicalized is the excessive drinking of alcohol, formally known as alcoholism (Conrad & Schneider, 1992). Conrad and Schneider's work on medicalization has expanded the knowledge regarding the labelling of certain behaviors as "illnesses". They acknowledge that the medical profession has led to the creation of new medical norms, as well as influencing

definitions, designations, and discovering new deviant “illnesses” (1992, p. 23). Although illness is a medical term itself, it represents the judgements of conditions that exist in the world, which are essentially social constructions that the human population has created (Conrad & Schneider, 1992).

Female violence has become the new “illness” within the criminal justice system and the news media, as their behavior is often seen as a medical problem that needs treatment. It is widely recognized that when women kill, it is generally associated with mental illness (Flynn, Abel, While, Mehta & Shaw, 2010). In both the Julie Schenecker and Charisse Stinson cases, their violence was discussed in a way that framed their cases within a medical framework, and their behaviors were interpreted as an illness. There was a mention of “illness” within both cases, in subtle and more definite ways. In the Schenecker case, it was mentioned that “Schenecker's mother had called police from Texas because she was unable to reach the 50-year-old woman, whom she said was depressed and had been complaining about her children” (The Associated Press, p. 3).

Depression is viewed as an illness and is becoming more medicalized in today's society and referring depression to Schenecker feeds into the narrative of medicalization. The *Tampa Bay Times* also stated that Schenecker “showed no remorse” (p. 2), which is a subtler reference to mental illness, as previous research on mental illness and psychopathy mention the lack of remorse as a commonly known main attribute for psychopaths (Spice, Viljoen, Douglas, & Hart, 2015). Using “no remorse” as a descriptive characteristic of Schenecker inherently links her to the stereotypical image of a psychopath or mentally ill. It is also stated by experts in the articles that “Schenecker's health status hasn't been made public, but the extraordinary crimes, coupled with video of her shaking uncontrollably and muttering to herself have caused speculation”

(Tampa Bay Times, p. 11). Referring to Schenecker as uncontrollably shaking can make it seem as though she is unstable, which is often a medicalized concept, and once again, constructs Schenecker as having traits of a mental illness.

There has been a perception within society that individuals who kill children must be mentally ill, as there seems to be “no other” explanation for violence against children (Jones and Wardle, 2008). An expert was interviewed for the *Tampa Bay Times*, where he mentioned that “when the killing appears intentional, the mothers tend to be older, better educated and often mentally ill, Meyer said. They're also likelier to kill more than one child” (p. 11). Through this quote, the public is informed that intentional killing is often linked with mental illness, which further stigmatizes and constructs women as lacking agency within acts of violence. There is no mention throughout the articles that men who kill are more likely to be mentally ill, which insists that the killing of children is explicitly related to older mothers who tend to be mentally ill. Though the Stinson case had fewer references to mental illness, several media accounts referred to Stinson as 'emotional' just days before allegedly killing her 2-year-old (*ABC Action News* p. 36).

Postpartum depression is one of the most common illnesses that is medicalized among violent women and mothers. Postpartum is commonly seen as an illness that occurs after pregnancy in some women (Stangle, 2008). Andrea Yates is a popular case of filicide, in which she drowned her five children in her bathtub and was deemed not guilty by reason of insanity and postpartum psychosis (Stangle, 2008). Postpartum depression is commonly used as a defense in the criminal justice system within cases of young children, and researchers argue that it should be applied more expansively to protect women who commit acts of violence (Stangle, 2008). Research states that postpartum depression makes the risk of maternal filicide higher for women

who recently gave birth and has been cited as a cause of filicide (Barnett, 2006; Dawson, 2015). Although not mentioned within the articles, postpartum illness should not be neglected in cases of female filicide. Although unlikely within the Schenecker case, as her children were 13 and 16 years old, Stinson's child was only two years old at the time of the murder and therefore, postpartum depression could still be a possibility. However, postpartum was not directly linked to Stinson in the newspaper articles.

The majority of references discussing mental illness within the Stinson and Schenecker cases came from authorities, including police and army linguists. The police and linguists act as claimsmakers in the news media, as they spread arguments and claims about mental illness, which may not fully be true. In this research, the medicalization of Stinson's and Schenecker's behaviours are viewed as a problem by the claimsmakers within the news media. The public is more likely to believe claimsmakers and treat mental illness as a serious issue, because the claims are being promoted by "respectable" individuals in society, such as law enforcement. Loseke and Best (2003) acknowledged that the public does not question, or challenge claims or issues being promoted by claimsmakers, which is part of the problem. The general public learns about the claims through the media reports and can have dramatic effects on public attitude and opinions about certain individuals or events (Best, 2008). A social constructionist perspective would examine the claims that are being promoted, ask questions, and question where certain claims are being derived. Within this research, the authorities and professionals claimed that Schenecker and Stinson were mentally ill, which is one of the reasonings behind the killings. In doing so, the authorities are pathologizing Schenecker and Stinson, which inherently removes their agency from the crime. Women who commit acts of violence against children are viewed as



mentally ill, which is an act of medicalization and removes the idea that women who commit violent acts are mentally stable and committed the act out of rationality.

Furthermore, part of the claims making process is to construct people as villains as dangerous outsiders and create diagnostic frames that blame the individual and encourage hate among the public (Loseke, 2003). Constructing individuals as dangerous outsiders classify them as “not one of us”, and they are less than human (Loseke, 2003). Within the cases of filicide, Stinson and Schenecker are classified as outsiders and deviants, as they killed their children and violated feminine characteristics. Being constructed as villains, especially through mental illness, shifts Stinson and Schenecker outside of societal norms and are made to be hated by the public for committing such crimes. Individuals quoted in the news articles even express: “I hope the judge takes everything from her [Stinson]” (*ABC Action News*, p. 33). In this case, the article is suggesting that punishment is warranted against the women, and the women are framed as villains through the claims-making process.

According to Conrad and Schneider (1992), the medicalization of deviant behaviour often reduces women’s violence to a medical problem (e.g., depression) that requires medical treatment. In both female cases, their violent behavior was commonly described as an illness. Moreover, the medicalization of female violence takes away the responsibility of the females, which is problematic if agency is removed from Julie Schenecker and Charisse Stinson, but not David Creato Jr and Chris Watts.

**The chivalry hypothesis.** As stated previously, Conrad and Schneider (1992) highlight that medicalization involves deviant behavior being constructed as an illness, and the need of punishment is replaced with treatment and rehabilitation. Many criminal cases involving females are sentenced to lighter sanctions than males. The lack of harsh punishment can be explained

through the chivalry hypothesis, which researchers such as Chase (2008) believe is used in circumstances where females receive more lenient sentencing for certain behaviors. According to Chase (2008), chivalry is based on the traditional female ideal, where they are seen to be more polite, caring and fragile than males. This ideal implies that females should be held less accountable than males for their violent behavior, as they are unaware of how to control their emotions, nor are they able to handle severe punishment. Under the chivalry hypothesis, it is argued that women receive lenient punishment due to non-punitive and paternalistic attitudes (Orthwein, Packman, Jackson, & Bongar, 2010). Wiest and Duffy (2013) acknowledged that women are more likely than men to be offered lenient punishment, as female violence is often medicalized and attributed to a mental illness.

A study by Flynn et al. (2010) revealed that over a third of women who killed their own children received a non-custodial sentence, compared to only 3% of men. Some researchers note that the leniency of sentencing can be due to paternalism and chivalry, as women are seen to need protection instead of punishment (Flynn et al., 2010). Social constructionists would argue this perspective as well, as female violence is considered a “rare” occurrence within the criminal justice system, and therefore, when they do commit violence, they are perceived as anomalies, which needs to be explained through mental illness (Wiest & Duffy, 2013). However, punishment and the lack of chivalry is more common for violent acts, such as filicide, as they are deviating from the “non-aggressor” trait that most females are stereotyped to possess. This idea is known as the typicality thesis of the chivalry hypothesis, where the female is not only punished for the violent act, but also for deviating from traditional feminine traits.

The typicality thesis of the chivalry hypothesis is most common with the female filicide cases that I examined, as opposed to the original chivalry hypothesis, considering that the need

for punishment was evident among family and community members. Multiple individuals interviewed within the news articles stated that Stinson needs to be sentenced to prison for a long time. Someone who attended the memorial service for the victim stated: “It’s not right. It’s cruel and she needs to be put away for a very long time,” (ABC Actions News, p. 6). The foster parent of Stinson’s son, Jessica Belliveau, also proclaimed: “she [Stinson] took everything from my son and I hope the judge takes everything from her” (ABC Actions News, p. 33). Belliveau continues to state “she isn’t going to get the chance to hurt this one like she hurt the last one. I’ll go to hell first,” (ABC Action News, p. 33). It is also mentioned that “the grandmother and great aunts of two-year-old Jordan Belliveau are pleading for justice now that the mom of the toddler is in jail accused of fabricating an elaborate story to cover up her son’s murder (ABC Action News, p. 40). According to *ABC Action News*, Stinson was charged with first-degree murder in the death of her son, and therefore, aligns with the typicality thesis of chivalry, in which harsh punishment is given to the offender.

In the case of filicide, retribution against the female offenders is insisted instead of rehabilitation because of the violence that is involved. The need for punishment is reiterated through the quotes examined within the news articles, which aligns with the idea that violent women are more likely to receive harsher sentences. Wiest and Duffy (2013) acknowledged in their study that women were more often found guilty and received severe sentences when they violated multiple traditional expectations of women, such as domestic responsibilities, the ‘goodness of women’ and non-violence. Charisse Stinson and Julie Schenecker both used very violent methods, which constructed them as deviants of femininity, and can be seen through quotes such as “I hope the judge takes everything from her” (ABC Action News, p. 33).

**Removal of agency/shifting of blame.** In most criminal cases, blame is placed strictly on the individual, however, medicalization removes the responsibility from the individual involved. Best (2008) explains that in our society, we routinely hold individuals accountable for deliberate acts. In lieu, individuals with an illness are not held accountable the same way as others. Therefore, medicalizing certain deviant behaviors, such as female violence, removes agency and blame from females, and places it on other factors (Best, 2008). In the case of Julie Schenecker, the media raised questions regarding the state's job when investigating child abuse complaints: "How easy it is now to second-guess the authorities who investigated an abuse complaint in November" (Tampa Bay Times, p. 9). Before the murder of Schenecker's children, child welfare workers investigated a complaint against the mother, but "documents released by the state agency said the family was in counseling and the children did not seem to be in any danger" (The Associated Press, p. 8).

Specifically, these quotes reveal that child-welfare agents investigated the family prior to the deaths, but the investigation was not substantiated or explored further. Through this explanation, the deaths of Schenecker's children can be misinterpreted and fall upon the authorities instead of Schenecker herself. The shifting of blame removes agency from women, which is problematic as it reinforces an image of women whose behaviours are conditioned by biological and emotional factors that prevent them from being viewed as a liable member of society (Saavadra & De Oliveira, 2017).

Similar concerns were raised by the media in the Stinson case, with one account suggesting that "...if Jordan Belliveau hadn't been returned to his biological parents, he would still be alive and well at their home" (The Associated Press, p. 7). The Stinson case caused uproar regarding the childcare system, especially to Jordan's foster family: "Jordan was failed by

the system. He was failed by many people who should have protected him but didn't. Promises that were made to us about how he would be protected after his return were broken" (The Associated Press, p. 7). Multiple titles of news article touch on the failure of the system: "Failed by the system': Foster parents devastated after police say boy killed by biological mother" (ABC Action News, p. 12), and "Foster care advocate says agencies made errors in returning 2-year-old Largo boy to unstable parents" (ABC Actions News, p. 19). Responsibility within these two cases was removed from the females and placed upon the childcare agencies, which is a common practice with the medicalization of behavior (Conrad & Schneider, 1992). Moreover, Conrad and Schneider (1992) acknowledged that "concomitant with medicalization there has been a change in imputed responsibility for deviance: with badness the deviants were considered responsible for their behavior; with sickness they are not, or at least responsibility is diminished" (p. 34). As Stinson's and Schenecker's behaviour is medicalized, the responsibility is diminished and shifted towards other factors, such as childcare. Overall, the lack of agency among Stinson and Schenecker – due to constructing them as mentally ill – shifts the blame onto childcare and social services instead of the offenders themselves.

Medicalization of deviant behavior can become a problem when it focuses more on the illness of the individual rather than taking into consideration larger societal influences (Best, 2008). In the case of Stinson and Schenecker, the shifting of blame has the reverse effect, as individuals were questioning the childcare system, and raised awareness of the larger issue: lack of policy. *The Canadian Press* stated that "the foster parents of a 2-year-old Florida boy who police say was killed by his birth mother are asking for a "fundamental re-examination" of the state's child protective services system" (p. 8). Moreover, "the foster parents of a Florida boy allegedly killed by his birth mother hope his death will lead to changes needed to protect other

endangered children” (The Canadian Press, p. 6). Community members even tried to push ““Jordan's Law” after death of Largo toddler allegedly killed by mom” (ABC Action News, p. 10). Expressing the need for changes in law shifts the blame from Stinson and Schenecker to the justice and childcare system. Incorporating quotes that demonstrate the need for change can also give hope to other families that are experiencing similar situations.

Other news articles featured interviews with Jordan’s foster parents: “We have to fix it. We have to learn from this. Because otherwise it's meaningless and it's just another child death. And we can't accept that,” (ABC Action News, p. 21). *ABC Action News* also highlighted that “A Change.org petition seeks to ensure other children in foster care are not reunified with their parents if there is a recent history of domestic abuse between the parents and if the child is in immediate danger” (p. 38). The focus on “fixing” or changing the childcare system can be seen through these quotes. However, despite having the focus on larger societal issues, such as childcare legislation, it still removes agency from women. The lack of attention that authorities had to the childcare system becomes the target of blame, which removes the accountability of Stinson and Schenecker. Their actions can be seen as delegitimized or insignificant if the focus of the news articles shift towards larger societal issues, such as lack of attention to the childcare system. As stated previously, the removal of agency from women is problematic, as it delegitimizes women and their actions.

### **Flawed Mother Narrative**

As previous research suggests, mothers are often viewed as the “all knowing” and “all powerful”, and they are supposed to nurture and protect, not kill (Barnett, 2006; Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002). The flawed mother narrative is used as an explanation for women who act out of the norm of a “mother” and illustrates the assumption that mothers should always act

within their “feminine” roles (Barnett, 2006). The flawed mother narrative also described mothers who kill their children as flawed because they failed at their caretaking responsibilities (Barnett, 2006). In this research, Stinson and Schenecker are viewed as flawed mothers, as they fail to protect and care for their children.

**Intertwining of mother and female.** Women and motherhood often go hand-in-hand, as individuals believe that women are born with maternal tendencies, and they are expected to act according to their socially acceptable feminine ideas, such as compassion and nurturance (Wiest & Duffy, 2013). As Wiest and Duffy (2013) acknowledge, motherhood is directly intertwined with cultural ideals of femininity, which assumes that the image of ‘good mother’ is linked with a ‘good women’, even though some women are not mothers. A good mother is one that possesses qualities of love and compassion, and a female (especially a mother) who deviates from those ideals is classified as a “flawed mother” or a “bad mother”.

In the media accounts sampled for the present study, Charisse Stinson and Julie Schenecker’s classification as a woman is indivisible as their role as mothers. Throughout multiple news reports, the women are discussed as “mothers”, and not as their female identities. For example, headlines for female filicide stated, “Florida mom charged with murder in case of missing son” (The Canadian Press, p. 5), and “Mother charged after 2-year-old in Amber Alert found dead in wooded area in Florida” (ABC Action News, p. 22). Very few headlines stated “female”, and instead the focus was shifted towards the parental attribute of being a mother. The title “mother” draws more attention towards the articles, as research has stated that mothers are seen as nurturers and harming one’s own child is the ultimate deviation (Barnett, 2006; Goc, 2009). The references towards motherhood is also apparent throughout the articles themselves.

*ABC Action News* states “[t]he mother of a 2-year-old Largo, Fla. boy, who was the center of a statewide Amber Alert, has been charged with murder in the death of her son” (p. 22).

Furthermore, there is reference to motherhood when discussing the shock value of the event. For example, when discussing Julie Schenecker, it is stated: “I think she was most disturbed that a mother could kill her own children” (Tampa Bay Times, p. 13). In this case, it is questioned how Schenecker, as a mother, could kill her own children. *The Associated Press* also describes: “I think we will never understand how or why a mother could take the lives of her children,” (p. 3). Due to being constructed as “nurturing” and “caring”, mothers are not expected to harm their children (Wiest & Duffy, 2013). When mothers struggle with caretaking, they assume that they are not the “typical” woman, and fear that they will be judged. Mothers who kill their children fall into this category of a non-typical woman and are critiqued more harshly due to this label (Wiest & Duffy, 2013). Therefore, headlines with the word “mother kills child” creates shock and judgement among the public. Moreover, being labeled as a mother reinforces society’s expectation and image of a ‘good mother’ and a ‘good women’, which is problematic in the treatment and constructions that the media and public associates with female offenders.

### **Mad versus Bad.**

The argument of mad versus bad has circulated academic literature for decades, as violent females are classified as either mad (those who’s behavior can be explained through illness), or bad (those who’s behavior is classified as evil-doing). Mothers who kill their own children are created into monsters by the media and labeled as “bad” because they are transgress what is considered maternal behavior (Goc, 2009). Within this research, Stinson and Schenecker are constructed as both “mad” and “bad”, as they transgress traditional female behaviour by killing their own children. By killing their children, the two females undergo various constructions in



relation to their role as a female, but also as a mother. Women not only have the expectation of being a mother, but they are also expected to be a good mother (Weare, 2013), which is why they are labeled as “bad” when they do not behave accordingly, as seen throughout the research. Using the label of “bad” is usually the result of the violation of gendered norms by women, which cannot be explained through the “mad” stereotype (Weare, 2013).

Although Schenecker and Stinson are not explicitly labeled “bad” within the articles, there are various mentions of their violence and deviation from their role as a mother. Moreover, Barnett (2006) acknowledged that “women who killed their children were often portrayed as evil, deceptive, and callous” (p. 416). The characteristic of deception is evident throughout the two female filicide cases that I examined, as they were viewed as not credible, unreliable and untrustworthy, as many authorities stated that they did not trust the stories of Stinson and Schenecker.

Authorities within the Stinson case and Schenecker case did not believe the women’s stories and pre-assigned guilt. The credibility of Charisse Stinson is questioned, as it was reported that the story that Stinson gave authorities regarding the murder of her son “was all fabricated by Ms. Stinson to help cover her alibi for what she'd actually done” (CNN, p. 2). Furthermore, an article written by the *Canadian Press* stated that in one press conference, police officials characterized Stinson’s initial testimony as “deceptive” (p. 5). The use of the word “deceptive” is used to describe women who are constructed as “bad”, which further constructs Stinson as a “bad” mother. Moreover, investigators said “initially there were parts of the story that the detectives felt were possibly not true (Canadian Press, p. 5), which further reiterates Stinson’s deceptiveness. In this case, Stinson was considered more “bad” than “mad”, as she was deceptive and had a pre-medicated story about the incident when she told the police.

The role of a “bad” mother can create shock among the public and readers, as mothers are supposed to be acting in line with their ‘natural’ feminine instincts, and be loving towards their own child (Barnett, 2006); when mothers deviate from this role, it creates shock and anger among the public. Killing one’s child is the ultimate sin, and as “a result, female offenders can be stigmatized twice – as a criminal and as breaking the societal conventions of female submission” (Collins, 2016, p. 297). In both the Schenecker and Stinson cases, there were multiple descriptions and statements that refer to the shock that was expressed by members of the community and family. One of Schenecker’s neighbours stated: "I just can't comprehend why this has happened to them" (Tampa Bay Times, p. 2). Others have stated: "I never thought this would happen. How could you do that to your children? (The Associated Press, p. 4). In this quote, the media is reaffirming the perception that mothers are not supposed to harm their children, and only the sickest and worst mother is capable of such an act.

*The Associated Press* also mentioned that “investigators believe the teens "never saw it coming" (p. 3). Officials on the Stinson case also proclaimed, "we are devastated to learn the tragic details of this case as they have unfolded” (ABC Action news, p. 15). It is not expected that a mother would harm her own children, and “lose” their natural abilities as a mother. As Weare (2013) acknowledges, “these women are bad because not only have they committed murder, they have murdered their own child, thereby demolishing the construction of motherhood for women” (p. 348). To be a good mother, a woman is expected to place her child’s emotional and physical well-being before her own needs, which does not happen when a mother kills her own child (Astrom, 2018). The Stinson and Schenecker cases act as prime examples of women who “lost” their natural abilities as a mother, and in turn, appear as failures and monsters.

The construction of mothers as failures and ‘bad’ mothers can be seen as a tactic by the media and criminal justice system to cast women into a certain stereotype. Chesney-Lind and Eliason (2006) observe the media’s role in constructing women:

It appears that both the media and the criminal justice system play crucial and complementary roles in the control of women. Popular media masculinize and demonize a few women, effectively casting them out of the ‘protected’ sphere of femininity, while celebrating the presumed passivity of the rest of womanhood. (p. 43)

Constructing violent women as evil and deviants is a tactic of social control, as the media provides an important platform in which individuals, such as the public and law enforcement professionals form their views and assumptions regarding violent women (Easteal et al., 2015). When women are constructed as “mad”, it may lead to individuals believing that women should not be punished for their crimes, but women who are constructed as “bad” are framed as deserving of punishment. Stangle (2008) notes that constructing females as mentally ill and denying female aggression “points to the troubling possibility that preserving myths of female passivity has become more important than protecting children and disciplining those women who commit heinous crimes (p. 733). Moreover, constructions of women in the media can reinforce stereotypes of “maternal” perfection, and control how the public views acts of maternity (Easteal et al., 2015). Violent women are often faced with societal expectations of femininity and motherhood and are stigmatized by the media in a way that constructs them as deviant and unfeminine.

Social control can also be seen through the media’s influence regarding legal proceedings, as Easteal et al., (2015) note that the news media often create particular versions of reality as they report cases of women who kill in a certain way, and therefore are contributing to

the social context in which legal processes are determined. (Easteal et al., 2015). Research on violent women in the media has previously acknowledged the influence that the media can have on legal proceedings and outcomes, such as cases involving Rosa Richards, Karla Homolka and Andrea Yates. It is important to recognize how the media constructs cases regarding violent women, not just filicidal women. Rosa Richards had been charged with the murder of her son, Dillon Palfrey, along side her partner Lindsay Gregory. At first, Richards was constructed by the media as a cold-blooded monster, and incompetent mother (Naylor, 2001). However, as Richards' trial continued, the media shifted Richards as a "killer" and "incompetent mother" to "someone who could have been a good mother had it not been for the difficult events of her life and her low IQ" (Naylor, 2001, p. 164). She was redefined by the courts and defense counsel as a victim of unfortunate circumstances, and as not significantly dangerous (Naylor, 2001).

Karla Homolka is another famous female case, who Kilty and Frigon (2016) highlight as being enigmatic, as her actions shifted the way women's violence was, and still is, discussed within the media. In 1993, Homolka was sentenced to 12 years in prison after being charged with manslaughter in the deaths of 14-year-old Leslie Mahaffy and 15-year-old Kristen French. Her sentence, although viewed by the public as "light", was a plea bargain in exchange for a testimony against her partner, Paul Bernardo. Research on Homolka has highlighted her constant constructions in the news media as "mad", "bad", and a "victim" (Kilty & Frigon, 2016). The media has effectively cast her as a victim of Paul Bernardo – a damsel in distress – through her role of a battered woman (Kilty & Frigon, 2016). However, as the case continued, Homolka was framed as 'mad' and her agency was questioned. Moreover, the framework of 'mad' quickly turned 'bad', as Homolka's actions were framed to be pure evil and played into the stereotype that only the maddest women can commit such violent acts.

Lastly, Andrea Yates is famously known for drowning her five kids in a bathtub in her Texas home. Yates was presented as both mad and bad in the news media, with the public initially viewing her as “evil” and manipulative, but transitioned into mad, as she was found to have been suffering from postpartum depression (Barnett, 2006). Yates was found guilty of murder, but the verdict was later overturned, and she was found not guilty by reason of insanity (Barnett, 2006; Stangle, 2008). As acknowledged by Stangle (2008), Yates’ defense counsel stripped her of agency, and drew upon normative female behaviour and constructions that no mother could act violently.

Richards, Homolka, and Yates are all examples of how female criminality and violence is constructed in the media. Although all three cases are different, they are similarly constructed regarding traditional femininity and the labels of ‘mad’, ‘bad’ and a ‘victim’, similar to the ways in which Schenecker and Stinson were also constructed. It is important to acknowledge that female filicide is only one example of how violent females are constructed within the media. As previous research has highlighted, women are problematized and constructed within all aspects, whether violent or not. Overall, the flawed mother narrative explains how women are viewed as “incapable” and “failures” when they deviate from their traditional roles of femininity (Barnett, 2006), which was seen within the cases of Stinson and Schenecker, as their roles as a mother were questioned because they committed acts of violence against their children. Women have been seen as caretakers and nurturers, and when they commit acts of violence against children, these labels are no longer seen as viable titles. Instead, they are viewed as a failure as a parent, and should not be allowed to bear children (Barnett, 2006). Further, constructing mothers as “flawed” also removes agency, as they are incapable of doing the one thing that is expected – caretaking.

### **The Role of Intersectionality Within the Cases.**

Although only one case out of four cases analyzed for this study was non-Caucasian, the overrepresentation of Black individuals in the criminal justice system is very much embedded in society (Thompson, 2010). At a first glance, there were not notable differences between the Stinson case and the Schenecker case. However, after a closer examination, it is observed that the Stinson case was written in a different framework than Schenecker. As opposed to the Schenecker case, the Stinson case had multiple mentions regarding the history of domestic abuse and drugs within the family dynamic. One article mentioned: "Records indicated the parents had a history of domestic violence and drugs were sold from the home" (ABC Action News, p. 2). Other statements state that "the 2-year-old was placed with foster parents after being exposed to drugs, guns and violence, according to documents" (ABC Action News, p. 1), and "The allegations (...) include Jordan being in a dirty home with no food, being exposed to weapons and drugs, and having been injured when his mother carried him into a fight" (CNN, p. 2).

Moreover, there were mentions that the home that the child was living in was dangerous: "The parents knowingly allow their infant son to reside in a dangerous environment" and "fail to understand the danger the baby is in when around gang members," (The Canadian Press, p. 7). In this quote, it is implied that the child was living in a dangerous environment, and that there was gang involvement. Based on previous research, non-Caucasian individuals are more likely to be constructed in relation to violence and gangs than whites (Crenshaw, 1991; Hitchens, 2019). The case of Stinson followed the stereotype of not only of a violent woman, but also of a black woman.

The credibility of Stinson was also significantly questioned more than Schenecker. Although the innocence of both were challenged, there were multiple statements within the

Stinson case that indicated that her story was a lie:: “police believe it was all a lie” (CNN, p. 2), and “police called her testimony "deceptive" at a press conference Wednesday Morning” (The Canadian Press, p. 3). These statements can further play into the aspect of race, as it suggests that deceptiveness and race are linked, and that being non-Caucasian had a greater impact on her credibility than if she were white.

Hitchens (2019) notes that “media representations disseminate racialized and gendered stereotypes about Black women as violent (such as the “angry” or “mad” Black woman), but also create a distinctive, classed framing of low-income, urban Black women as “ratchet” and “ghetto.” (p. 188). Although Stinson was not classified as “ratchet” or “ghetto”, there were many mentions of Stinson’s low-class throughout the news articles, which implies this “ghetto” lifestyle. *ABC Action News* stated that “A case manager noted that Stinson was forced to sell her furniture because she didn’t have money” (p. 38), and that “Stinson told the case manager she was working on getting a new apartment but needed help with a down payment” (p. 38). Moreover, Stinson could not afford a phone, which further demonstrates that she was living a low-income lifestyle.

Schenecker, on the other hand, was framed as being part of a more affluent community. talked about more in a “higher class” framework, with quotes suggesting that she came from a wealthy, high-value lifestyle. *Tampa Bay Times* states that “[Schenecker] and her husband paid \$448,000 for their home. They own two others. She drove a Mercedes-Benz. She's married to a long-time military officer whose income is estimated in six figures” (p. 19). There were many references to the high-value of her home throughout the news articles, with *The Associated Press* stating Schenecker lived in an “upscale home” (p. 3), and that “Schenecker’s bought the house in 2008 for \$448,000” (p. 3). Schenecker was also discussed as a “suburban Florida Soccer mom”

(The Associated Press, p. 6), and that they lived in a “quiet, upscale suburban neighbourhood” (p. 4). These quotes suggest that Schenecker was well-off and had a more luxurious life than Stinson, and therefore, created more “shock”, as the public does not associate violent offenders with white, high-class individuals (Hitchens, 2019). As observed, Stinson was discussed in a way that highlighted her lifestyle as a low-income mother, whereas Schenecker was described as a “high-scale, suburban mother”. The association of violent women is often portrayed through lower class, non-Caucasian individuals (Hitchens, 2019), which is further reiterated through the media portrayal of Stinson.

Although gender is the primary factor regarding media constructions of male and female filicide cases, intersectionality also plays a vital role. As the Schenecker and Stinson cases differed largely from the Watts and Creato Jr. cases in terms of gender, the Schenecker and Stinson cases also have differences in terms of race. Race is an important factor to be considered, as media representations of black women are stereotyped differently than that of white women (Hitchens (2019).



## **Chapter Five**

### **Constructions of Male Filicide in the News Media**

Male violence is normalized within society, due to the assumption that men are violent and aggressive in nature (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002). As such, when the news media covers a story regarding male violence, it is not scrutinized in the same way as female violence. However, Dawson (2015) states that there is a lack of research on media constructions of fathers who kill their children, which my research seeks to do. When analyzing the male cases of filicide – Watts and Creato Jr – two dominant narratives emerged: 1) hegemonic masculinity, and 2) the born criminal. These two narratives will be discussed, and examples from my analysis of news articles will be included.

#### **Hegemonic Masculinity**

When analyzing the two male cases of filicide, major differences between the male and female filicide cases appeared, such as the role of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity has various definitions and interpretations, but refers to the form of masculinity in a setting that structures hierarchal gender relations between males and females, between masculinity and femininity, and among men (Messerschmidt, 2012). Other researchers have stated that hegemonic masculinity is understood as the practice that allows male dominance over females (Messerschmidt & Connell, 2005). The term hegemonic masculinity also has influence within the realm of criminology, as data reflect that men and boys perpetuate more conventional and serious crimes than women (Messerschmidt & Connell, 2005). The concept of masculinity itself centers around a heteronormative concept of gender which focuses upon the differences between men and women (Messerschmidt & Connell, 2005). Within the filicide cases, hegemonic masculinity was observed through various statements and themes, such as the shifting

of blame towards females, the proclamation of innocence, and the independence of male and father.

**Are men blamed for their actions?** Across both male filicide cases, there were multiple mentions of the wife/girlfriend of the perpetrators, and their role in the killing of the children. The mention of a female counterpart in the news articles may shift the blame from the men onto the women, which further promotes men as responsible, as opposed to women. Alder and Polk (1996) acknowledged that men might kill their children out of threat or to punish another person, mainly the child's mother. Within the Chris Watts case, the offender stated that he killed the mother due to seeing the mother strangle his children on the baby monitor (which is later to found as false). *The Denver Channel* stated: "[Watts] went on to claim to officers that after he told Shanann he wanted to separate; he saw Shanann strangling their daughters on a baby monitor" (p. 10). From this statement, it portrays Chris Watts as the hero who saved his daughters from his wife, and that he was punishing his wife for her behavior.

In a sense, Watts is justifying his violent act by placing the initial blame onto his wife. When women are murdered by a partner, it is common for males to justify their actions through the idea that these women acted "out" of their traditional female roles and the male became provoked. In this case, Shannan was seen strangling the daughters (which is deviating from the characteristic of nurturer and caretaker), and therefore, Watts' response to the situation is constructed as understandable, and implicitly if not explicitly, condoned (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002). Watts's violence is justified, and the responsibility is shifted to the wife, due to her deviation from her traditional female role – even though the statement that Shannan was strangling her daughters was later deemed unfounded and not true.

Berrington and Honkatukia (2002) acknowledge that male violence towards females are constructed in terms of the female's failure to conform to patriarchal norms, such as being domesticated, and a "mother". When females, such as Shannan, act outside of the traditional "norm", it is justified for the male to commit such an act against her. The second case involving David Creato had similar ties to the shifting of responsibility from the offender to the female counterpart. *The Associated Press* stated that "the father of a 3-year-old boy found dead in a park last year killed him because he had become an impediment to his relationship with a teenage girlfriend" (p. 3). Prosecutors also "alleged that Creato killed Brendan to stop his 17-year-old girlfriend, who disliked children, from leaving him" (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*, p. 8). In both cases, the male offenders shifted the blame of the killings onto their significant others, which portrays the dominance that males possess over women, reinforcing/reproducing hegemonic masculinity.

Although the blame was not assigned towards Creato Jr and Watts in the news articles, research acknowledges the males tend to receive harsher punishment in court than women (Orthwein et al., 2010). Gender bias in the courts is an enormous issue, as women who kill their children are seen as "mad", and men are seen as "bad", which influences the leniency of sentences (Orthwein et al., 2010). According to Wilczynski (1997), based on UK data, men are more likely to be prosecuted than women (90 percent versus 46.4 percent). Although the news article frame Watts and Creato Jr as innocent, they both received charges of murder (*The Denver Channel*; *The Associated Press*).

**Proclaiming innocence.** Men have typically been viewed as rational and responsible beings within society (Thompson, 2010). When men claim their innocence for an act, they are viewed as reliable and honest, due to their label of being "rational." Convincing other individuals

that they (men) did not commit a certain act, when they did, creates a false image that men are always honest, rational, and responsible, which is further promoted within society. Throughout the news reports of male filicide, there was a theme of innocence that differed from the female cases. As discussed earlier, females were often assigned guilt and viewed as deceptive. The males, on the other hand, were viewed as innocent from the beginning, which contributes to the role of male hegemony and hierarchy.

In the Watts case, Chris would describe the loss of his children as devastating, and acted innocent, even though he was not. One article stated: "My kids are my life. Those smiles light up my life. I want everybody to just come home," (Mirror.co.uk, p. 26). Watts also described the events from his perspective: "I was trying to get home as fast as I can, I was blowing through stop lights, I was blowing through everything just trying to get home as fast as I can because none of this made sense" (Mirror.co.uk, p. 2). Watts proclaimed his innocence, and his story and statements were not found deceptive by the authorities, unlike the female cases. Moreover, Adler and Polk (2001 in Wiest & Duffy, 2013) acknowledged that fathers who commit filicide are more likely than females to deny their involvement and try to cover up their act, which is exactly how Watts reacted. Throughout the media, Watts was proclaimed as innocent, and reacted as though he was not involved in the case, as seen through the quote "My kids are my life" (Mirror.co.uk, p. 26), and "I have no idea, like where they went" (Mirror.co.uk, p. 2) when discussing the disappearance of his kids and wife.

The David Creato Jr case contained several similar references. Most of the public and authorities did not believe that Creato was a suspect in the case, as the lawyer on the case described: "the police have told me unequivocally that there are no suspects, that my client is not a suspect, and that they're trying to piece together what happened here" (The Philadelphia

Inquirer, p. 2). The lawyer continues to express that “[h]e's presumed innocent of these charges, and we're going to do everything that we can to make sure that the people know it, and that everyone knows what his family knows, which is that he didn't commit this crime” (The Philadelphia Inquirer, p. 8). The authorities and lawyers act as claimsmakers (Loseke, 2003), as they try to claim and promote the fact that Creato Jr is not guilty. Claimsmakers are viewed as credible individuals, and therefore, when Creato Jr's lawyer claims that he is innocent, it creates a false image. Furthermore, it is described that “There's no reason why this father would take his son's life,” (The Philadelphia Inquirer, p. 18), and that “Creato maintains his innocence” (The Associated Press, p. 16). *The Philadelphia Inquirer* mentioned that “It's a shame for this father, who now stands accused of a crime he didn't commit” (p. 17). This quote insists that Creato is not guilty of the crimes that he is accused of, which further plays into the stereotype that males are not the ones most commonly assigned the label of “child murderer”.

Often, when children go missing from their homes, or are claimed to be murdered, it is the mother, the wicked witch of fairytales, and evil mother, who is appropriated for the news frame (Goc, 2009). Men are rarely framed as child homicide offenders, as a mother who kills their own children is considered the most wicked and evil of them all – which is significantly more newsworthy than fathers who kill their children. Moreover, the non-questioning of Creato Jr. and Watts further contributes to the hierarchal gender relations and demonstrates the male advantage in society.

After the public discovered the role of the offenders in the killing of the children, many community members were shocked. The David Creato Jr. case had support from the beginning, as he was presumed innocent. and that individuals were “surprised to hear of Creato's arrest” (The Philadelphia Inquirer, p. 6). These quotes indicate that Creato Jr. was not believed to be a

suspect in the murder of his son. Moreover, Watts's plead as guilty conviction also caused confusion and shock among the public: "Mike Hendrickson said he and his wife were "shocked" at the news that the family was missing. "They seemed like very quiet people and very nice, cordial people," he said. "My wife would also say how much she admired [Chris] for the attention that he paid to those young 'uns.'" (The Denver Channel, p. 11). Men are not expected to be offenders of child homicide, as they are usually constructed as "breadwinners", "leaders", and "powerful", not as fatherly figures. The quote that states that a community member admired Chris for the attention that he paid to his children further plays into the construction that men are not primarily associated with being fathers. In this case, Watts is being admired for paying attention to his children, as this is an act that is not seen as "typical" for men. However, women are not praised for taking care of children, as that is their assigned role within society. This gendered difference is important regarding the media constructions of males, and their lack of association with fatherhood.

**Independence of male and father.** Unlike the female cases observed, the role of a father was not the primary identity of the male offenders. Once again, hegemonic masculinity explains the hierarchy that males possess within society, and the insignificant role that fatherhood plays. Females are the ones who are assumed to be "mothers", whereas males as historically viewed as a "breadwinners", and "dominant" figures in relationships (Wiest & Duffy, 2013). The status of "father" for men does not play a significant role in how men are constructed and discussed, as it is not part of their master status or label, as opposed to women. Within the news articles, many headlines and descriptions of the male offender excluded any association to fatherhood. Within the articles discussing the Creato Jr. case, he was often referred to as "23-year-old Haddon Township man (The Associated Press, p. 10), and "23-year-old David "D.J." Creato Jr., of

Haddon Township” (The Associated Press, p. 16). Referring to Watts and Creato Jr as “men” in the news articles reaffirms their dominance and master status within society. As Wiest and Duffy (2013) acknowledge, fatherhood is often disconnected from expectations of masculinity, and therefore, fatherhood does not play a significant role in the constructions of paternal filicide cases. There were instances where father was mentioned, such as “New Jersey dad” (The Associated Press, p. 2), and “Father charged with killing Haddon Twp. Boy” (The Philadelphia Inquirer, p. 5), but these instances were less common.

The case of Chris Watts was also described in a similar way. In the titles, Watts was described as “Man charged with killing family” (The Denver Channel, p. 28), and “Colorado man charged with killing his family and dumping their bodies at an oil worksite” (The Denver Channel, p. 28). Both of these quotes are examples where Watts was not linked with his role as a father. There was no mention of fatherhood, nor was Watts mentioned by name, therefore, unless readers read further, Watts would not be associated with the news article. There was one instance where Watts was referred to as “a ‘killer’ dad” (Mirror.co.uk, p. 18), as well as “husband who sobbed on TV about missing pregnant wife and daughters, 3 and 4, 'confesses to their murder'” (Mirror.co.uk, p. 2). However, similar to David Creato Jr, those instances were rare. Referring to Watts as a husband that “sobbed” also creates sympathy towards Watts, as men are not seen as “emotional” beings. The mention of Watts as “sobbing” changes the tone of the article, as readers are more likely to sympathize towards Watts, instead of holding him accountable for his actions.

As Messerschmidt and Connell (2005) acknowledge “hegemonic masculinity came to be associated solely with negative characteristics that depict men as unemotional, independent, nonnurturing, aggressive, and dispassionate—which are seen as the causes of criminal behavior”

(p. 840). As Watts is casted as an emotional figure, it deviates from this “unemotional” characteristic, which is often associated with masculinity and criminal behavior. Being “emotional” creates an image of an individual who does not commit criminal behaviour (Messerschmidt & Connell, 2005), which Watts falls under, and therefore, can be deemed innocent. The news media uses specific language and tactics to promote a certain discourse and construction of the individual, which in this case, is the discourse of fatherhood and creating sympathy towards his male identity. In short, the association of being a male and a father is minimal in the news articles, as males are seen to be aggressors and powerful individuals, not a parental figure.

### **The Born Criminal**

Violent acts among males are not scrutinized in the same way as females, as males have been constructed as violent and aggressive for decades. The born criminal theory, founded by Lombroso, has been linked to the explanation of male violence, as he argued that criminals are born with physical and/or psychological abnormalities that predispose them to criminal behavior (Savapoulos & Lindell, 2018). While deemed flawed, Lombroso’s theory has been used in research to explain male violence and has led to the use of other theories in criminal cases, such as “testosterone theory”, in which males are deemed to be more aggressive in nature due to higher levels of testosterone (Denno, 1994). Even from a young age, boys begin to experience signs of higher testosterone, as they display aggression in circumstances that females would not. Although testosterone theory has been scientifically proven, the law still does not allow men to blame their actions on their predisposed masculinity and higher levels of testosterone (Stangle, 2008). The lack of “masculine” and “male” defenses in court has raised some criticism from researchers, as biological defenses do not exist for men, but the law strives to take into



consideration female biological realities, such as postpartum depression (Stangle, 2008). Within this research, Lombroso's biological theory, and testosterone theory can be used to explain the promotion of certain gendered language within the male articles of filicide. Compared to the female cases, the male cases have language that assumes they are violent and aggressive beings, and that they are just being "men". This use of language can further promote the image of men as already predisposed violent beings, and therefore, their level of involvement in the crime can be viewed differently or less seriously than the female cases.

In cases of homicide, male violence tends to highlight the rage and aggressiveness that are presumed to be dominant traits (Alder & Polk, 1996). When men do commit homicide, particularly against their children, the public is more understanding because of the link between aggression and masculinity (Wiest & Duffy, 2013). However, it is important to analyze the context in which scientific theories, such as testosterone theory, are used to explain male violence but not female violence. Research on female violence is explained more so through the pathologizing of deviance and motherhood, as opposed to explaining their violence through biological attributes such as males.

The link between men and aggression is apparent throughout male filicide cases, such as those of Watts and Creato Jr. Although committing an act of murder is already deemed violent, the news articles used violent language and imagery, which further establishes male violence. Violent language was used to describe the offender, as well as the event. The murder involving Chris Watts was described as: "he went into a rage and ultimately strangled Shanann to death," (The Denver Channel, p. 2). The term "rage" itself is used to explain male aggression, which is a significant trait that is linked to male offenders. According to Messerschmidt and Connell (2005), "men's behavior is reified in a concept of masculinity that then, in a circular argument,

becomes the explanation (and the excuse) for the behavior” (p. 841). In this case, Watts’ masculinity is used as an explanation and excuse for his aggressive and violent behavior. Moreover, the method of concealing the murders was violent, as: “Chris Watts 'killed pregnant wife and girls, 3 and 4, stuffed children's bodies in oil tanks to hide smell’” (Mirror.co.uk, p. 18). Watts’s methods and acts of violence can be explained through testosterone, as men are seen to be already predisposed to violent behavior due to higher levels of testosterone. Stangle (2008) acknowledges that evidence indicates that even a male holding a gun can cause an increase in testosterone levels in men, which renders them more prone to violent behavior and methods.

David Creato Jr’s case was also described violently, as the *Philadelphia Inquirer* mentioned that “the day his 3-year-old son's body was found in Haddon Township woods, the boy's head face-down in a shallow creek, his pajama-clad body slumped over a rock” (p. 10). Other language was used within the articles when describing the victim, such as asphyxiation, drowning, and strangulation (The Philadelphia Inquirer, p. 8). The type of language that is used reaffirms that men are expected to behave and act in a way that perpetuates socially defined masculine ideals, such as aggression and dominance (Wiest & Duffy, 2013). Researchers, such as Dawson (2015), have noted that men partake in more violent methods of homicide compared to females, which is apparent within the cases discussed. However, Stangle (2008) notes that biological dispositions can often be used as a reason for such aggressive and violent behavior among men.

When discussing David Creato Jr’s case at the time of the murder, multiple news sites acknowledged that Creato Jr. was not “acting” as though he committed a crime. The Philadelphia Inquirer states that prosecutors were “addressing concerns that Creato Jr. sounded too calm in the call” (p. 2), and that there is “certainly a level of concern you hear in his voice, but he's not

hysterical” (p. 2). The calmness that was used to describe Creato Jr. does not align with the traditional masculine characteristics that are assigned to violent males. As previously stated, men are constructed as violent and hostile, and they are predisposed to biological factors that affect their levels of aggression (Alder & Polk, 1996; Savapoulos & Lindell, 2018). Stating that Creato Jr. was calm and not hysterical creates an image that only aggressive and violent men can commit crime – as it is believed that male offenders are violent – and therefore, removes Creato Jr. as a suspect.

Overall, although biological factors are known to influence men, there is an absence of male-oriented defenses compared to female defenses, which demonstrates that laws and society “cater” to violent women more so than men due to gender ideals being engrained within the legal system. Catering more towards violent females and creating such laws “promote a dangerous, unnecessary, and highly unfair breed of leniency toward women who kill” (Stangle, 2008, p. 731). Moreover, violent acts are accepted more within cases of male offenders, as individuals believe men ‘will be men’, which includes the use of aggression and force, whereas mothers are expected ‘to be women’, which include compassion, love and nurturing (Wiest & Duffy, 2013). These news articles outlining cases of male filicide are further insisting that “men will be men”, and that aggressive behaviour and violence is a normalized characteristic within fathers and males.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Discussion**

Based on the analyses of the four sampled cases, most of the findings that emerged in the current study aligned with previous research on the constructions of violent offenders within the media, especially regarding gendered constructions (Barnett, 2006; Goc 2009; Saavedra & de Oliveira, 2017). Violent females are often associated with motherhood, while males are associated with masculinity and aggression. Although there is research regarding females who kill their children, there is a lack of literature examining males who kill their children, and the differences between the two (Goc, 2009). This research not only provided insight into the constructions of males, but also examined significant differences in the media constructions of males compared to females. These constructions within the media reinforce the public's perception of gender roles, and how males and females are supposed to "act" in regard to their status.

#### **Constructions of Mental Illness**

When analyzing the cases of Julie Schenecker and Charisse Stinson and comparing them to the cases of Chris Watts and David Creato Jr, there were numerous differences in how they were constructed. The differences in portrayals raised questions regarding the role that gender plays within the media, and how gender is socially constructed within society. One main finding was the pathologizing of offenders. Schenecker and Stinson were both medicalized and framed as suffering a mental illness, however, Watts and Creato Jr were not. Instead, the behaviour of Watts and Creato Jr was framed using the scientific model. This main difference can raise awareness regarding the acceptance of male violence compared to female violence. Female violence, especially against one's own child, is not seen as acceptable within society, as they are violating the traditional held beliefs of femininity and motherhood (Wiest & Duffy, 2013). In

order to justify the actions of females, the medical model is applied (which also shifts towards the bad label – only the worst mother can kill her children). There is a conception among society that any female that murders their own child must be medically insane, or that they suffer from postpartum depression. Assigning the label of mentally ill permits special treatment towards women, solely based on their biological makeup, and reinforces a construction of women who is weak and vulnerable (Stangle, 2008). Wiest and Duffy (2013) acknowledge that “the idea that a mother ‘must be’ crazy appears quite frequently in cases of maternal filicide, as it seems to be more difficult to accept that a mother in her ‘right mind’ could be capable of such an act” (p. 348). The view is that only the most insane and unstable woman could commit such a terrible act, such as filicide.

On the other end of the spectrum, males are not classified the same way, as biology is often used as an explanation for their violent behavior. As stated previously, decades of research have linked male aggression and violence with biological differences and testosterone (Alder & Polk, 1996; Denno, 1994). The biological and scientific model are used to defend male violence, especially in cases of filicide, as seen throughout the analysis of the Chris Watts and David Creato Jr cases. This construction can be seen as delegitimizing mental illness in males. Throughout all the articles that were examined, there was no mention of Watts or Creato Jr suffering from a mental illness. The association of mental illness and males is not widely acknowledged, as males are not prominently seen to be victims of illness compared to females. Male offenders especially are seen as more “rational” and “responsible” beings, and therefore, mental illness is often not used as a reason for their actions (Thompson, 2010). Research has demonstrated that mental illness is a common factor among paternal filicide (Othwein, Packman, Jackson & Bongar, 2010), and there is no gender difference in the overall rate of mental illness,

but there is a difference in the type of mental illness males and females may suffer from (Orthwein et al., 2010; Thompson, 2010). Evidence has also revealed that men suffer from psychological issues following the birth of their child and can suffer postpartum depression as well (Stangle, 2008). Based on statistics from the American Psychological Association, one in ten males meet the standards for postpartum depression (Stangle, 2008). Moreover, male depression and illness can have significantly more negative effects on children than their female counterparts (Orthwein et al., 2010). Some symptoms of male postpartum depression can include hallucinations, rage, and even violence (Stangle, 2008). However, mental illness as a reasoning behind a violent act for men is not highly used as a defense in court compared to women, and therefore, men often receive harsher penalties (Stangle, 2008).

Chris Watts and David Creato Jr could in fact have been suffering from a mental illness or postpartum at the time of the offense, but this narrative does not fit with the typicality of male offenders. The media tends to focus and reinforce narratives that align with the public's perceptions, which can be a reason why Watts and Creato Jr were not constructed as mentally ill, but Stinson and Schenecker were. Framing men as mentally ill does not reinforce traditional male characteristics, such as "independent", "aggressive" and "dominant". As previously stated, mental illness and medicalizing one's behaviour removes agency, which is problematic for males, as they are seen as responsible and rational beings, and thus would contradict this narrative.

### **Newsworthiness**

The media has a significant role in how cases of filicide are portrayed, as they are primary decision makers in deciding what information is included, the framing of the titles, and the quotes that are used. Altheide (1997) acknowledged that the mass media, especially online

news media, are part of the “problem-generating machine” that is geared towards entertainment and voyeurism, instead of creating the social change that is needed. News stories are often the result of careful selection from a vast range of potential news stories and are selected due to their level of newsworthiness (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002). Newspaper stories can bring claims to the attention of the public, as well as policymakers, however, media coverage almost inevitably reshapes and alters claims (Best, 2008). As observed with the results of my study, the media promotes societal constructions, and does not challenge preconceived ideas and judgements. In fact, the media is shown to reinforce gender ideologies and hierarchies within society. Moreover, in some cases, the media shapes and alters claims to the point where they are reinforcing gendered stereotypes. In cases of violence, the media is known to construct stories and cases in certain ways that creates fear and stigmatization among the public. When reporting crime and entertainment, space is devoted to violence within the news media, as violence is highly sensationalized (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002).

Within the filicide cases that were examined, it was apparent that the media framed the cases in a way that constructs the offenders based on traditional assumptions of gender. Both Stinson and Schenecker were constructed as “mothers” who deviated from their caring and nurturing self, which could only be explained through the medicalization of their acts. Watts and Creato Jr were linked to masculinity, who committed the acts of violence out of rage, which had nothing to do with their role as a parental figure. Moreover, Watts was even praised from a community member for spending time with his daughters – something that is not seen as “traditional” for males. These constructions of males and females within the media reinforced traditional conceptions of gender, which further promotes this framework to the public. This framework is problematic, as it can have influence over the leniency of punishments, how men

and women are treated within the criminal justice system, and the constant stigma and questioning of character that men and women face when committing an act of violence.

It can be argued that the media promoted a “Medea news frame”, as they constructed women as violating gendered norms. According to Goc (2008), the Medea frame is a way of representing women who step out of society’s definition of ‘normal’ or who hurt their children. Mothers who hurt their children are considered more newsworthy and sensationalized because women are still seen as nurturers to most individuals (Goc, 2008). Stinson and Schenecker’s cases were both highly promoted in relation to motherhood, as most of the headlines had reference to “mother”, or “killer mom”. Having titles that promote female offenders as mothers entices the public into reading the article and maintain the constructions of females as mothers.

As previously stated, males and females commit the same amount of filicide, however, the media promotes filicide as an act that is primarily committed by females (Dawson, 2015). Berrington and Honkatukia (2002) acknowledge the sensationalization of female violence:

because so few women engage in deviance in general and killing in particular, those who do offer a particular fascination. Violence is male, macho and, therefore, expected whereas the same behaviour by women is conceived as aberrant or a cause for concern (p. 59).

When women do commit acts of violence, it is highly publicized and viewed as newsworthy due to the rarity and the challenge that violent acts pose to dominant gendered stereotypes and perceptions (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002). Moreover, compared to male cases, the female cases observed had more “shocking” titles that would lead to more shock and newsworthiness from the public. However, given the gendered expectations of motherhood, the public shock following a report of a mother killing her child is not surprising. These mothers are violating the



public's belief of femininity and deviate the strong conception of a 'good mother' and a 'good woman' (Wiest & Duffy, 2013). Male cases of violence are not as shocking due to their already preconceived characteristics of masculinity – aggression and violence.

### **Race and Filicide Cases in the Media**

One of the cases analyzed, Charisse Stinson was black, as opposed to the other three cases, who were white. The role of race within news media articles has been discussed as an issue in previous research, which is important to acknowledge during my research. Within my research, there were instances where Stinson was framed as a “low-income” and “ghetto” individual, which is common among portrayals of Black offenders within society (Hitches, 2019). In the articles, there was no mention of her race, or ethnicity, however, there was mention of gang involvement in the house (ABC Action News), which is often associated with the minority communities, such as non-Caucasian. Moreover, Stinson was solely referred to by name, or by “mother”, but was often discussed in relation to her struggles with income. Schenecker was also characterized as a “mother” but was labelled as a “suburban mother” in numerous articles, which associates Schenecker with being affluent. Due to the small sample size of the study, and only focusing on one case that is non-Caucasian, it is difficult to determine whether the construction of the case was based on race, or femininity. A larger sample size including more non-Caucasian cases would be necessary to observe differences in race among cases of filicide.

Overall, multiple themes emerged within this research, which have played into larger narratives, such as the pathologizing of female offenders, and hegemonic masculinity. There were distinctive differences within the male and female cases, especially when comparing the construction of mental illness, as the news media promotes certain narratives which further

propagates gender roles. Female cases of filicide largely revolve around mental illness and the medicalization of their deviant behavior, which significantly removes agency from women; however, male cases of filicide do not mention mental illness, which is problematic, as it reinforces a framework that all men are powerful, rational and responsible beings within society. The inclusion of race and intersectionality is an important framework, as different races and cultures are framed differently, not only in cases of filicide, but within social positions in society (Crenshaw, 1991). More research should address the differences within male and female filicide, as well as the impact of intersectionality within cases of female and male violence.

## Chapter Seven

### Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine cases of filicide in the news media through the lens of social constructionism to argue that cases of female filicide are constructed differently than cases of male filicide. I sought to answer the following three research questions:

(a) How does the media construct stories about male filicide as compared to cases of female filicide?; (b) What are the main discourses and representations that arise from each of the cases?; and (c) How does the media reinforce traditional constructions of gender, such as motherhood and fatherhood?

Four main filicide cases were analyzed: Charisse Stinson, Julie Schenecker, Chris Watts, and David Creato Jr. Through the examination of these cases, various themes and narratives were observed, including the pathologizing of females, the flawed mother narrative, hegemonic masculinity, and the born criminal. These themes reiterated the role that the media has in reinforcing certain gendered constructions of violent offenders. As results suggested, females were constructed as “mothers”, and males were linked to “masculinity” and “aggression”. Although previous research has highlighted the constructions of female filicide in the news media, there was a lack of research highlighting male filicide, and the gendered differences between the two.

Throughout my analysis, Stinson and Schenecker were referred to as “mothers”, which created shock and newsworthiness among the public. As stated by Altheide (1997), the news media is a machine in which issues and events are created into “problems” that are geared towards entertainment. The mass media and public perceptions regarding certain individuals and issues are inexorably linked, as the media promotes discourses that are perceived by the public as

“true”. Within this research, the media promoted female violence in relation to motherhood. Stinson and Schenecker were viewed as “mothers” who deviated from traditional femininity and characteristics such as care and compassion. Multiple community members of the offenders expressed their fear and resentment towards the mothers, as they could not believe that a mother could harm her own children. When females act violently, especially towards children, they are created into “mad” or “bad” mothers – they are viewed as “mad” when the reasoning behind the act is mental illness, or they are “bad” when they act out of the norm of motherhood or femininity (Barnett, 2006). Violent acts among women are only justified through medicalization and insanity, as it is hard to believe that women can purposefully deviate their natural caretaking tendencies and harm children.

As observed, the medicalization of females created a construction of a “mad” mother, which inherently removes agency from women. The removal of agency from females can be problematic, as they are not viewed as trustworthy and responsible individuals in society. Contrary, males are not medicalized, and are still viewed as responsible and “clear-minded” individuals. This construction of males is also problematic, as it removes the possibility of mental illness within male cases of violence. Moreover, very few males are seen to be mentally ill, which can delegitimize males who do suffer from mental illness. Throughout the articles, there was no reference of Watts and Creato Jr suffering from a mental illness, which is significantly different from the cases of Stinson and Schenecker. Both Stinson and Schenecker were medicalized and viewed as mentally ill, which concludes that males are not medicalized in the same way as women, if at all.

The four articles analyzed for this research is only a small representation of how males and females are constructed differently within news articles. There are numerous other cases of

filicide that need to be observed, including those from various racial or ethnic groups. In this instance, there were a few limitations within my research, which are important to note. First, the use of qualitative analysis focuses on a smaller sample size than quantitative studies, which affects generalizability of the study (Barnett, 2006). Although I examined four popular filicide cases, it is not a large enough sample that would be able to determine if all filicide cases are constructed the same. A total of 100 news articles were chosen for my sample, which was necessary given the time-frame of this study.

The filicide cases that I used were chosen based on popularity and recency. However, all cases occurred in the United States. The United States has more popular filicide cases, and easier access to published news sources. Analyzing international cases of filicide would have been beneficial for my analysis, as I would have had a broader and larger sample. Furthermore, I used the database Factiva to gather most of my news sources, which did not include access to every news source that discussed each case. I only used two news sources per case (one national, one local), which also limited my data collection and analysis. If I used more news sources per case, my sample size would have increased and given more variety in political positions (left-wing news sources and right-right news sources).

Future research for my study includes taking an international comparison when analyzing filicide cases. Each country has their own laws and regulations regarding filicide, which is important when observing the constructions of such cases. Some cultures, such as Japan, normalize the killing of one's child (Drixler, 2013), as children are seen as disposable. This normalization is different than the one observed within the United States, and therefore, would produce different results and constructions. The differences in cultural practices and murder is important in the way the media constructs filicide. Moreover, a great sample size of filicide cases

should be analyzed, as it would provide more data and results in relation to the constructions of cases among various news sources. Future research should also take a “new media” framework, by analyzing multiple sources of data, such as Twitter, and Facebook. Although news articles are one of the main sources of media, the use of other “new media” is becoming more popularized with the growth of social media. The discussion of filicide cases, and the various constructions that are emerging from new media is important for future researchers to highlight.

In conclusion, this research highlighted the various constructions that males and females are given in the news media, which is associated with traditional gendered ideals. Females are frequently associated with motherhood, and femininity, which creates a double deviation when females commit acts against children – they are not only committing an act of violence, but also deviating from their traditional feminine roles (Collins, 2011). As opposed to females, males are associated with aggressiveness and rage, which are normal “masculine” traits, and therefore, their acts of violence are not stigmatized in the same way as women. The construction of both males and females in the news media further promotes gendered constructions within society, which is problematic regarding punishment and treatment within the criminal justice system – a factor that needs to be further explored in future research.

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